



The Law Society

**Proposal on the provision of court and tribunal estate in
England and Wales**

The Law Society response

October 2015



Introduction

The Law Society of England and Wales ('the Society') is the independent professional body, established for solicitors in 1825, that works globally to support and represent its 163,000 members, promoting the highest professional standards and the rule of law.

The Society welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Ministry of Justice's ('MoJ') consultation on proposals for the provision of the court and tribunal estate in England and Wales.

In preparing its response, the Society has consulted its members and conducted a survey of the profession in order to assess the effect of the proposed closures. That survey received 823 responses. This response reflects our members' views.

Question 1: Do you agree with the proposals? What overall comments would you like to make on the proposals?

No. The Society does not agree with many of the proposals.

The Society is seriously concerned about the impact of the proposed closures. Whilst the Society agrees that a modernised court service and efficient use of technology would benefit all court users, this must not come at the expense of access to justice.

In summary, the Society's concerns are:

1. Access to justice;
2. Impact on court users;
3. Use of technology;
4. Legal aid contracts; and
5. Other impacts.

We set out each of these concerns in more details below.

1) Access to justice

A key aspect of access to justice is being able to go to a local court without incurring unreasonable expense. Almost all of the proposed closures would result in court users travelling further, at greater cost.

Length of journeys

In some instances, the proposed closures would mean that individuals have to travel for up to two hours to reach the alternative court. For example, the proposed closure of Barnstaple Crown Court would mean that 81 per cent of individuals would face a journey of over two hours by public transport to Exeter Crown Court instead. The length of journeys is a particular concern for individuals living in rural areas, those who do not have access to a car, people on low incomes, and those who have to travel with children or have mobility issues. Longer journeys would also have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable court users. For example, victims in domestic violence cases are under great emotional and financial strain, and often have a limited support network. Requiring such vulnerable claimants to travel for over two hours to court would make an already stressful situation even harder.

Longer journey times would also impact small business owners, who may have to take a day out of their business in order to attend court to resolve disputes, and employees of local authorities and other organisations who have to attend court in possession hearings,

tenancy disputes and other proceedings. Other agencies involved in the justice system would also be affected. For example, prison and probation staff would spend more time transporting defendants to and from court and less time dealing with their day-to-day work, which is an inefficient use of time and resources.

The travel times given in the consultation paper represent the 'best case scenario'; they assume that public transport is reliable and will not be cancelled or subject to delay, and that roads are never congested, closed or affected by poor driving conditions. They also do not take sufficient account of local geography and conditions. Some locations may appear to be close to each other on a map, but the reality of travelling between the two can be very difficult. One respondent to the Society's survey gave a helpful illustration of this in relation to Treherbert and Merthyr Tydfil in Wales:

*"As the crow flies, Treherbert is about 7 miles from Merthyr. By bus or train, it requires a change at Pontypridd, a travelling time increased to about 1.25 to 1.5 hours each way, and obviously a doubling of the cost."*¹

The travel times given are also from court to court. In fact, the key issue for court users will be the distance from their home or place of work to the alternative court. The consultation also does not take account of the fact that many court users live in surrounding rural areas and will often have to travel into the nearest conurbation before travelling on to court, which will substantially increase their journey time.

Cost of travel

The cost of travel is another significant concern for court users. People whose financial situations are aggravated by recent changes in housing benefit, rising rents and low wages, will suffer even greater problems if they cannot afford to attend court to explain their situation.

Many courts begin at 10:00am and individuals are often required to be there in advance of their hearing. Individuals who need to travel for an hour or more on public transport to reach court may be travelling in peak time. Peak time travel tickets are usually more expensive – in some instances, double the cost of travelling outside peak hours. It is not clear from the consultation paper or impact assessment whether the bus and train ticket prices stated are peak time prices or not. If not, the proposals should be re-assessed in light of the added expense of travelling in peak time, as having to do so would make going to court even more unaffordable for those on low incomes and those who may need to travel with children and thus buy more than one set of tickets.

The ancillary costs of longer journeys must also be taken into account. In family and care cases, for example, travelling an extra hour each way could mean that families need to spend money on extra childcare.

Risks

Longer, more expensive journeys present several risks. The most obvious one is that individuals would not be able to get to court on time, especially in rural areas where public transport is often unreliable. Even where people have a car, bad weather or traffic conditions can make driving in rural areas exceptionally difficult at certain times of the year – roads may become impassable in winter or congested with tourist traffic in summer, considerably slowing down travel. Roads in rural areas are often single lane roads and in poor condition, which can also slow down travel. Another risk is that individuals will simply not attend court

¹ Survey respondent.

because the cost of travelling is too high. There is also a risk that more onerous journeys would create a perverse incentive for individuals to deliberately not attend and subsequently be transported to court for free by the police rather than pay high travel costs. If individuals are prevented from attending court, this would result in general delays and extra work for court staff, but if witnesses do not attend court because of the costs and travel times involved, this could have serious implications for the outcome of a case.

Local justice

If the proposed closures go ahead, fewer people would be able to go to court in their local area. MoJ's business plan for 2011-15 states (emphasis added):

*“For many people the Criminal Justice System is remote, complex, represented most obviously by the police and something with which they see no need to engage unless they have a problem with which they need help. Levels of awareness and understanding are low and levels of active involvement or participation – unless driven by a particular need – are not as high as we would like to see. The Criminal Justice System provides an essential public service. To do so effectively, there needs to be greater awareness and engagement by **local** agencies with the communities they serve and a greater willingness at neighbourhood level to support and work with **local** services to address issues of community concern. To achieve this and in the interests of transparency and increased accountability, we need to increase the level of access by communities to **local** criminal justice information and services. We need to create the conditions which enable communities to play their part.”*

The Court Estate Reform Programme ('CERP') introduced in 2010 resulted in the closure of 142 courts across England and Wales. That programme has led to a drastic reduction in the number of courts in particular areas. For example, Dorset has seen 11 courts close since 2010. The proposal to close another 91 courts and tribunals further undermines access to justice, and the principle of local justice set out in the MoJ's own business plan above.

2) Impact on court users

The Society is concerned about the impact of the proposals on the judiciary, jurors, HM Courts and Tribunals Service ('HMCTS') staff and the prison and probation services. We set out our concerns about the impact on each of these groups below.

a) *Jurors*

Jurors are not included on the list of affected groups in the impact assessment.²

Our concerns about the cost and length of travel times set out in (1) apply to jurors as well as other court users.

Government guidance for jurors states that jury service “*will be as close as possible to where you live.*”³ The proposed court closures undermine that statement. Some jurors would find themselves very far from a local court. For example, if the proposal to close Morpeth County Court is taken forward, the alternative court would be Newcastle upon Tyne. According to MoJ's figures, 71 per cent of those currently using Morpeth County Court would have a journey time of one to two hours by public transport to Newcastle. Jurors living in remoter areas of Northumberland would have

² Impact assessment, page 4.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/jury-service/overview>

to travel even further. Individuals may be discouraged from participating in jury service by such long and arduous journey times.

Longer, more expensive journeys for jurors would have knock-on financial impacts for HMCTS. Jurors can claim expenses for travel – both on public transport and by car. If jurors have to travel further, and at more costly times of the day, to reach court, HMCTS would have to bear the financial burden of paying for lengthier car journeys and more expensive public transport tickets.

b) *Court staff*

Whilst our members have the highest regard for HMCTS staff, there is a perception that the quality of the court service has declined due to recent court closures, staff cuts and resultant resourcing constraints. Solicitors who responded to the Society's survey repeatedly shared their frustrations about administrative problems and delays that they currently experience in courts and tribunals. These problems would be exacerbated if busy courts are closed and their workload transferred to other courts that are already operating at high capacity. For example, MoJ is proposing to close Barnstaple Crown Court and transfer the work to Exeter Crown Court on the basis that Barnstaple is under-used. However, our members have informed us that trials have already been listed to take place at Barnstaple in March 2016 because of the backlog in work at Exeter. In the North West, our members are gravely concerned about the ability of Manchester Civil Justice Centre to absorb the work of eight county courts should the closures go ahead.

No consideration appears to have been given to the possibility of relocating work from extremely busy courts to the apparently under-used courts listed in the consultation paper. The Society would suggest that transferring cases from courts with backlogs of work and overly-long waiting times to courts with spare capacity would represent a more efficient use of the court estate than 91 closures.

c) *Judiciary*

The MoJ is a member of the Judicial Diversity Forum, which is a group of organisations dedicated to improving the diversity of the judiciary. The other members are senior members of the judiciary, the Judicial Appointments Commission, the Bar Council, the Law Society and the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives. In the 2014 Judicial Diversity Taskforce report, the Minister for the Courts and Legal Aid, Shailesh Vara MP, said:

“A more diverse judiciary is important in retaining the public's confidence and trust in justice, and better reflecting the society it serves and I am committed to improving this while still appointing the best people for the job.”⁴

The Society is concerned that court closures would reduce, not increase, judicial diversity. Fewer courts mean fewer judicial vacancies and fewer opportunities for new entrants to join the judiciary. Longer, complex journeys may discourage new entrants from applying and lead to current judges leaving. In a backbench debate on court and tribunal services on 17 September 2015, Nic Dakin MP explained that two serving magistrates in his constituency of Scunthorpe are significantly visually

⁴ Improving Judicial Diversity, Final Annual Report (2014), page 10:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/judicial-diversity-taskforce-annual-report-2014>

impaired.⁵ Both magistrates are able to make a full and active contribution to the court at Scunthorpe, but would not be able to do so if the work were transferred to Grimsby, as MoJ proposes.

d) *Police, prison and probation services*

The effect of the proposed closures on other agencies, particularly the police, prison and probation services, has not been sufficiently considered. The impact assessment states that:

“CPS staff and the police may have longer travel times to court with associated increased costs. This may be offset by shorter travel times where more remote courts are closed and work transferred to courts closer to CPS or police locations.”⁶

However, no evidence has been provided to support this statement.⁷ Indeed, some of the proposed closures would result in courts being further away from local police and probation services. For example, Lowestoft Magistrates’ Court, County Court and Family Court is very close to the local police station and is near the new shared offices of the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Company, yet is proposed for closure. Court work based in Lowestoft would be transferred to Ipswich (45 miles away). It is difficult to see how such closures would result in shorter journey times for police and probation staff. Instead, closures could mean that police time is unnecessarily spent transporting victims, witnesses and defendants to court where those individuals are unable, or reluctant, to attend court due to the time and cost involved. There would also be time and cost implications for probation and prison staff who have to transport prisoners to courts further away if the local court closes. This is not an effective or efficient use of police, prison and probation service time.

e) *Youth court users*

Approximately 30 of the courts and tribunals being proposed for closure are used for youth court cases.

The impact assessment does not consider youth justice separately from the adult system. Youth court cases are different to adult cases in several respects and may necessitate changes at court buildings that do not currently hear such cases. For example, section 31 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 requires that young people and adult defendants are kept separate, both in custody and not in custody at court. Separate entrances for young people and adults would need to be available at courts that have not previously held youth court hearings.

The impact assessment also does not consider the particular difficulties that young defendants may face in attending courts that are further away. Parents cannot always afford to accompany young people on long and expensive journeys – this would be exacerbated under the proposals.

MoJ wishes to see greater use of technology, such as video links, which it thinks may reduce the need for in-person hearings. Whilst this may be appropriate for some

⁵ See *Hansard*, Thursday 17 September 2015, column 1286:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/chan46.pdf>

⁶ Impact assessment, page 9.

⁷ Impact assessment, page 9.

youth cases, our members report that face-to-face contact is often necessary for some young people to ensure they understand the gravity of the situation.

Finally, the impact assessment appears to assume that court utilisations rates will not change. However, this fails to take account of the commencement of new legislation and new offences. For example, section 28 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 introduces a new minimum sentence for second strike knife possession and may mean that more young offenders are arrested and taken to court for repeat possession of knives.

The Society recommends that MoJ re-assesses the impact of the proposals on youth court work.

3) Use of technology

Part of the rationale for the proposed closures is that better use of technology could improve the court service and reduce the need for in-person hearings.

The Ministerial Foreword to the consultation states that, *“increased use of technology such as video, telephone and online conferencing will help to drive these improvements.”* However, these facilities are not yet in place across all courts. Our members report that, even where courts have video link facilities and other technology, this does not always work. Internet access and connection in certain areas is also problematic. One member based in Wales reported that an attempted video link with the Family Division Liaison Judge in London had to be abandoned as the internet connection was so poor. It is also difficult to understand why MoJ is proposing to close courts that already have up-to-date facilities installed and operational, given the government’s aim to make greater use of technology. For example, MoJ is proposing to close Burton-upon-Trent Magistrates’ Court, Bath Magistrates’ Court and Hartlepool Magistrates’ Court and County Court, all of which have video link facilities already.

The Society agrees that a modernised court service and efficient use of technology would benefit all court users. However, substantial financial investment would be needed to upgrade existing court facilities and to ensure that they are fully operational. It will also take time to install new technology in the courts and tribunals. Proper consultation and proper investment will be essential to ensure that new technology works and meets the needs of all court users. **The Society recommends that it would be prudent to modernise the courts with new technology, assess how that is working and then consider savings, rather than the other way round.**

4) Legal aid contracts

The Society is very concerned about the impact of potential court closures on the tendering process for legal aid contracts.

Our members have bid for contracts, and been assessed, on their delivery plans to provide services based on the current network of courts and police stations. If the closures go ahead, the contracts awarded will need to deliver a different pattern of services. Solicitors bidding for contracts could not have anticipated this at the time they made the bid. Had the potential closures been announced far sooner, firms may have drafted different delivery plans or opened offices nearer to courts that would still be operational.

For example, one of our members set up an office in Bridgend in order to meet the tender requirements. Bridgend Law Courts is now proposed for closure. Had the closure of

Bridgend been announced earlier, the solicitor in question may have opened an office in Cardiff instead.

The Society is concerned that the court closures, if they go ahead, would lead to our members being financially unable to meet the requirements of the legal aid tenders through no fault of their own. Our members made tender bids in good faith, entirely unaware that courts in their area may close. Worryingly, some of our members have said that they may withdraw their tenders altogether as they do not believe they would be able to fulfil their contract if courts closed in their region. This would have a detrimental effect on the availability of legal advice to those individuals that qualify for legal aid, as well as threatening the viability of our members' businesses.

5) Other impacts

Combined effect of closures and fee increases

The impact of court closures cannot be viewed in isolation. The court fee increases introduced in March 2015 and the proposed further fee increases that MoJ consulted on in July-September 2015 have made going to court even more expensive for individuals. Court closures represent another diminution in access to justice.

Welsh language

There has been insufficient consideration of the impact of the proposals on the provision of Welsh language services. The provision of advice in the Welsh language is essential and would be reduced if certain court closures go ahead.

Question 2: Will the proposals for the provision of court and tribunal services have a direct impact on you? If yes, please provide further details.

Yes. The proposals will directly affect our members, as set out in our answer to question 1.

Question 3: Are there other particular impacts of the proposals that HM Courts and Tribunals Service should take into account when making a decision? Please provide details.

Yes. Please see Annex A, which sets out the impact of each proposed closure.

Question 4: Our assessment of the likely impacts and supporting analysis is set out in the Impact Assessment accompanying this consultation. Do you have any comments on the evidence used or conclusions reached? Please provide any additional evidence that you believe could be helpful.

The Society is concerned about the lack of transparency in the information provided in the impact assessment.

Utilisation rates

In answer to a written question on 17 September 2015, the Minister for the Courts and Legal Aid, Shailesh Vara MP, confirmed that the average utilisation rate for courts in England and Wales is 46 per cent.⁸

⁸ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

Many of the courts proposed for closure have a higher-than-average utilisation rate. The Society finds it difficult to understand why MoJ intends to close busy courts and transfer their substantial workload to other courts that are already overstretched. Our members are concerned that this would result in slower, less efficient service at the alternative courts, longer waiting times for hearings and additional stress for court staff.

Our members have told us that they have not been given sufficient information about the utilisation of individual courts and the number of hours sat by judges in a court to be able to fully assess and respond effectively to the proposals for the closure of individual courts. Members are also concerned about how the usage figures were calculated. For example, in relation to Burton Magistrates' Court, the consultation states that this court has four court rooms. We have been informed that this is not correct and that the court has three court rooms plus a small annex that is only used when necessary. Figures from HMCTS, quoted in the local press, show that courtroom 4 was only used for 64 hours in 2014-2015.⁹ As a result, Burton Magistrates' Court is stated as operating at 51 per cent capacity. If the usage figure is calculated based on the three actual court rooms, it would be higher.

Finally, our members are concerned that work has been deliberately transferred away from courts in order to run down the workload and therefore justify closure. For example, Newbury was removed from the Prisoner Transport Contract, which meant that any case with a potential custodial sentence could not be heard at Newbury, despite investment in the custody suite at the nearby police station.

Criteria used to determine closures and travel times

Neither the consultation paper nor the impact assessment sets out the criteria used to identify the courts and tribunals proposed for closure or consolidation, nor does it explain how travel time has been assessed. In a Freedom of Information request, the Society asked MoJ for:

- a) a copy of the data and analysis that was used to determine the list of court and tribunal buildings to close or merge;
- b) a copy of the assessments made against the criteria;
- c) a copy of the model used to assess travel times; and
- d) in the event that summaries of the information listed in (a), (b) or (c) above exist, copies of those summaries.

However, MoJ declined to provide this information.

The Society understands that the travel times presented within the consultation document used data from the Department for Transport ('DfT') Journey Planner tool, which was shut down on 30 September 2014 and is no longer available online. It is not clear how MoJ was able to use this tool to model travel times when it is no longer in use, and, as a result, whether the data in the consultation document is fully up-to-date. The fact that the DfT model is no longer publicly available has made it impossible for the Society to test the assumptions in the consultation paper using the same model. **The Society recommends that MoJ publishes the model used to calculate travel times so that the methodology can be independently assessed.**

⁹ Burton Mail, 29 August 2015: <http://www.burtonmail.co.uk/Figures-courtroom-used-just-64-hours-year-Burton/story-27694766-detail/story.html>

Our members have repeatedly told us that the travel times stated in the document are misleading and do not take sufficient account of local geography or transport infrastructure. For example, MoJ proposes to close Consett Magistrates' Court and transfer the custody work to Peterlee Magistrates' Court. The consultation paper states:

“Consett Magistrates' Court is situated 26 miles from Peterlee. The nearest train service runs from Stocksfield approximately seven miles from Consett. The travel time by train from Stocksfield to Seaham which is five miles from Peterlee is approximately one hour. The approximate cost of a return ticket is £12.40. Travel time by car is approximately 50 minutes.”¹⁰

However, members have told us that:

“Stocksfield is... 10 miles north of Consett. The only access to Stocksfield station from Consett is by car or taxi. There is no bus service from Consett to Stocksfield except via the Metro Centre interchange which would take 1 hr 43 minutes. To reach Peterlee from Seaham Rail station will involve a further taxi journey. Travel time by car from Consett to Peterlee may be approximately 50 minutes, but only in good traffic conditions. 1hr -1 ¼ hrs will need to be allowed in rush hours. There are several choices of routes, but whichever route is chosen there will be increased journey times in rush hour. Crossing Chester le Street involves crossing the A1 (M) where traffic can sometimes be stationary. Crossing Durham or navigating round Gateshead is very slow in rush hours. And traffic on the A19 frequently often grinds to a halt.”¹¹

This is just one example of many concerns that our members have raised about the travel times stated in the consultation paper. These concerns are set out in more detail in annex A.

Factual errors

Our members have pointed out a worrying number of factual errors in the consultation document, which suggests the proposals have been based on inaccurate information. Factual errors have been raised by MPs in Parliament. For example, in a backbench date on 17 September 2015, Andrew Bingham MP pointed out several errors in relation to Buxton Magistrates and County Court – namely that the consultation document says that there is no lift, when in fact there is, and that witnesses and defendants are segregated at all times, unlike the consultation suggests.¹²

Consideration of alternative proposals

The policy options considered include “do nothing” or adopt the policy proposal in the consultation paper. The option of re-allocating work from courts that are currently over-worked to under-used courts does not appear to have been considered. The Society would suggest that re-allocating work would enable courts to be used more efficiently. We suggest some ways in which this could be done in Annex A.

¹⁰ Proposal on the provision of court and tribunal services in the North East region, page 12: https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/proposal-on-the-provision-of-court-and-tribunals/user_uploads/official-sensitive_north-east-consultation-paper_final.pdf

¹¹ Survey respondent.

¹² See *Hansard*, Thursday 17 September 2015, column 1275: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/chan46.pdf>

Question 5: Are there alternatives to travelling to a physical building that would be a benefit to some users? These could include using technology to engage remotely or the use of other, civic or public buildings for hearings as demand requires. Please explain your answer, with specific examples and evidence of the potential demand for the service where possible.

The Society has set out its views about greater use of technology in answer to question 1, above.

In the consultation paper, MoJ draws a comparison with hearings that already take place outside of the legal system, such as school admission and exclusion appeals, and suggests that other civic and public buildings could be used for court proceedings.

It is difficult to understand why MoJ is proposing to close courts that have modern facilities such as video link technology, and to hold hearings in public buildings that do not have similar technology, particularly given the Ministerial foreword to the consultation. Members have raised several concerns about the proposal to use other civic or public buildings for hearings as demand requires – these are set out below.

Security

Security of public buildings is a major concern – not just for victims and witnesses, but also for the judiciary and members of the public who were using a building for non-court business. Public buildings may not have the necessary facilities to separate witnesses, defendants and other parties, or private rooms that can be used for interviews. Public buildings would not be suitable for criminal proceedings or for contested hearings, particularly in family matters, where feelings can run high due to the nature of the dispute. It would be extremely difficult to predict in advance which hearings would be low risk enough to hold outside of court, and therefore to correctly gauge security requirements. Although local authority offices are often used for school admission hearings and exclusion appeals, these proceedings do not have the same security and other requirements as formal court cases.

Document storage

Some courts require documents to be filed with the court 24 hours in advance of the hearing. It is not clear whether MoJ envisages that such requirements would apply even if a hearing was to take place in a public building. In any event, public buildings may not have sufficient secure storage for confidential case files, documents and evidence.

Public perception

There is consensus among our members that the gravitas of the law, and its reputation in society, will be damaged if hearings are not held in formal court buildings.

Available facilities

Many members who responded to the Society's survey said that there were no public buildings in their area that would be able to provide video link, witness/defendant segregation and interview rooms like their local courthouse. These facilities would need to be installed, at cost. As stated above, it is difficult for the Society and its members to understand why MoJ is proposing to close purpose-built courts and use public buildings that, in many cases, have inferior facilities.

Lack of pilot scheme

The proposal to use alternative public buildings for court proceedings is currently untested. The Society is concerned that the consultation paper does not mention any plans to test whether using alternative public buildings would work before taking forward such proposals, nor does it estimate the cost of doing so. **The Society recommends that, if MoJ decides to take forward this proposal following the end of the consultation, that a rigorous and lengthy pilot scheme is put in place to assess and address the potential impacts set out above.**

The Society also recommends that MoJ carries out a separate consultation regarding the use of public buildings before considering whether this is an appropriate solution. This consultation should include specific details of proposed alternative venues, travel times (calculated using a model that can be independently tested) available facilities at those venues, and details of which cases and court users MoJ thinks would be suitably accommodated at alternative sites. The Society would also recommend that an impact assessment be carried out in order to assess the cost of installing appropriate court technology and facilities at those alternative venues.

Question 6: Please provide any additional comments that you have.

The Society would be happy to meet officials from MoJ to discuss the concerns set out in this response in more detail.

Annex A – Law Society comments on specific proposals

London

Bow County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bow County Court.
- Bow County Court is a busy court, partially because of the closure of nearby Ilford County Court in 2010. It operates at 47 per cent capacity – above average for courts in England and Wales.¹³ Our members are also concerned about the impact that closing Bow and transferring its heavy workload to Clerkenwell and Shoreditch County Court would have on waiting times at the latter. Closing Bow County Court would severely impact access to justice for court users travelling from east of Bow; public transport to Clerkenwell and Shoreditch County Court is not direct.. **The Society therefore recommends that Bow County Court should remain open.**

Feltham Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal, but notes that closing this court would mean that there is no Magistrates' Court in the Hounslow Borough, which reduces local access to justice.

Greenwich Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.
- We understand that the proposed alternative court, Bromley Magistrates' Court, offers a counter service five days per week and that there are adequate transport links – 92 per cent of users would be able to reach Bromley Magistrates' Court within 30 to 60 minutes according to MoJ's figures. However, travelling to Bromley would still present difficulties for court users. Court users travelling by car or by bus would have to go via the Blackwall Tunnel, which is often congested and causes considerable delay or even gridlock at busy times. The alternative to travelling by bus or car is to take a train to London Bridge and then onward to Bromley; this is a costly option and would not be affordable for many court users, particularly vulnerable clients and those on low incomes.
- If, in light of the consultation responses, MoJ decides to go ahead with the proposal to close this court, then **the Society recommends that MoJ considers whether the work could be transferred to a nearer court.**

Hammersmith County Court (formerly West London County Court)

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Hammersmith County Court.
- As MoJ recognises in its consultation paper, this court is “a critical location for crime work.” It has no Equality Act or security issues and is used 62 per cent of the available time – this is above the average utilisation rate of 46 per cent in England and Wales. In contrast, the proposed alternative site, Wandsworth County Court,

¹³ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

would need to be expanded to accommodate staff from Hammersmith. Our members are also concerned that the alternative courts would not be able to offer similar facilities to Hammersmith. For example, Hammersmith still offers a limited counter service. If the court closes, solicitors would have to use other courts, which may be less efficient.

- Closing this court would increase travelling time for court users. Whilst this may be less of an issue for many users in central London due to the good transport network, disabled users and those with mobility issues may find the journey more difficult.
- **For these reasons, the Society recommends that Hammersmith County Court remains open.**

Lambeth County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Lambeth County Court.
- Our members tell us that this is a busy and important court, particularly for housing possession cases, which is reflected by the fact that it is open five days per week. Closing this court would mean that a huge amount of work is transferred to Wandsworth, which would need to be expanded to accommodate additional staff. Members have questioned the accuracy of the utilisation rate of 39 per cent given in the consultation paper, stating that the wait times for applications and trials to be listed at Lambeth is already excessively long as the court is so busy.
- Individuals in poverty and on low incomes who are facing housing possession claims would face hardship if this court is closed. The Housing Possession Duty Advocacy scheme at the court is a local safety net that provides access to justice for poor and vulnerable people. In addition, local solicitors have been running a Help Desk at Lambeth County Court two mornings a week for the last two years and hope to extend this to a Personal Support Unit scheme to assist unrepresented persons, who are increasing in number. The vital work of both the Housing Possession Duty Advocacy Scheme and the Personal Support Unit would be lost if the court is closed.
- A significant proportion of users of Lambeth County Court are local authorities, among them the London Borough of Lambeth, the London Borough of Southwark, and the London Borough of Lewisham. The closure of Lambeth County Court would mean that those local authorities would incur substantial extra costs due to housing officers, housing benefit officers and local authority lawyers needing to travel farther at higher expense. Housing associations that regularly have cases at Lambeth would be similarly affected.
- Lambeth County Court is leasehold and the lease does not expire until 2024. It is not clear from the consultation paper what MoJ intends to do with the building if the court is closed. The Society assumes that MoJ does not intend to close the court and leave the building empty until the lease runs out in 2024, as to do so would mean incurring another 10 years' rent with no corresponding benefits. However, breaking the lease may actually result in additional cost for MoJ. Consequently, there would be limited financial gain for MoJ if Lambeth County Court is closed as the property is not freehold.
- **The Society recommends that Lambeth County Court remains open.**

Pocock Street Tribunal Hearing Centre

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. The Society understands that the lease on this building is due to expire in 2017 and that there are other tribunals that could be used within a three mile radius, so the impact on court users should not be great.

Richmond-upon-Thames Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal, but notes that closing this court would leave Richmond Borough without any Magistrates' Court.

Tottenham Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. The Society understands that this court offers a limited public counter service, whereas the proposed alternative venue, Highbury Corner Magistrates' Court, provides a counter service five days per week. The consultation paper states that 68 per cent of users will be able to reach Highbury Corner within 30 to 60 minutes by public transport – this is the same as the percentage of users who are able to reach Tottenham in that time.

Waltham Forest Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. The Society understands that this court was proposed for closure in 2010 but kept open due to concerns its workload would increase due to the closure of Barking Magistrates Court and Olympic Games, however, it is still under-used. The proposed alternative site, Stratford Magistrates' Court, offers a counter service five days per week and more modern facilities. In addition, 76 per cent of users would be able to reach Stratford Magistrates' Court within 30 to 60 minutes.

Woolwich County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Woolwich County Court. Closing this court would reduce local access to justice by increasing travel times for court users. If the proposal goes ahead, 67 per cent of court users would have to travel for over an hour to reach Bromley County Court instead. The difficulty and expense of travelling to Bromley would be considerable for many court users. Court users travelling by car or by bus would have to go via the Blackwall Tunnel, which is often congested and causes considerable delay or even gridlock at busy times. The alternative to travelling by bus or car is to take a train to London Bridge and then onward to Bromley; this is a costly option and may not be affordable for many court users, particularly vulnerable clients and those on low incomes.
- **The Society recommends that this court remains open.**

Midlands

Birmingham Youth Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Birmingham Youth Court.
- This closure would have a significant impact on defendants, who would have to appear in the adult court, in breach of the government's statutory and international obligations. Closing the Birmingham youth court would have a major effect on youths, who would then be dealt with in the adult court.
- The Society has had the benefit of seeing the response of Birmingham Law Society and agrees with the points set out in that response.
- **The Society recommends that Birmingham Youth Court remains open.**

Burton-upon-Trent Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Burton-upon-Trent Magistrates' Court.
- Members have raised serious concerns that the usage figures included in the consultation are inaccurate, as the figures are based on four courtrooms when in fact there are only three usable rooms. The fourth room is extremely small and only used in limited circumstances. Figures from HMCTS, quoted in the local press, show that courtroom 4 was only used for 64 hours in 2014-2015.¹⁴ The consultation paper states that Burton-upon-Trent operates at 51 per cent capacity - above average for courts in England and Wales.¹⁵ It is a busy court that is well-used. The closure of Tamworth Court under the CERP programme in 2010 makes Burton-upon-Trent even more vital for local people.
- MoJ proposes to transfer cases to Derby Magistrates' Court, Cannock Magistrates' Court and North Staffordshire Justice Centre if the closure goes ahead. However, members are concerned about whether those courts have the capacity to absorb additional work cases coming from Burton.
- Closing Burton-upon-Trent Magistrates' Court would have a detrimental effect on access to justice. Travel times for court users would be longer. The majority of those using public transport (55 per cent) would have to travel for over one hour to reach court, and 13 per cent would need to travel for over two hours to get there.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Burton-upon-Trent Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Buxton Magistrates' and County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Buxton Magistrates' and County Court and transfer cases to Chesterfield Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court Hearing Centre.

¹⁴ Burton Mail, 29 August 2015: <http://www.burtonmail.co.uk/Figures-courtroom-used-just-64-hours-year-Burton/story-27694766-detail/story.html>

¹⁵ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

- Our members have pointed out several inaccuracies in the it is stated that there is no lift, but members tell us that one was installed six years ago at a cost of £250,000. In a backbench debate in the House of Commons on 17 September 2015, Andrew Bingham MP pointed out several further factual errors.¹⁶
- The closure of this court would also lead to severe travel difficulties for court users. The consultation paper states that 73 per cent of court users would have to travel for over two hours to reach the court in Chesterfield. This is unnecessarily arduous. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Buxton Magistrates' and County Court remains open.**

Corby Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Corby Magistrates' Court.
- Corby is one of four magistrates' courts in Northamptonshire. The others are Kettering, Wellingborough and Northampton. Kettering Magistrates' Court is also proposed for closure. If Corby and Kettering were to close, Northamptonshire would be served by just two magistrates' courts. This would place additional strain on the two remaining courts and substantially reduce access to justice for court users, who would have to travel further to reach court. The consultation paper states that 60 per cent of people who currently use Corby would need to travel for one to two hours by public transport to reach Wellingborough Magistrates' Court instead, at a cost of £11.80. Our members tell us that many court users in Corby are on benefits and £11.80 represents a huge proportion of the weekly jobseekers' allowance. These people would struggle to meet the cost of travelling to Wellingborough. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society recommends that Corby Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Grantham Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Grantham Magistrates' Court.
- Closing this court would be a severe blow to access to justice in Lincolnshire, which has seen 12 courts close in the last 10 years.
- MoJ proposes to transfer cases from Grantham to Lincoln Magistrates' Court, 30 miles away. This means that 78 per cent of those travelling by public transport would need to travel for between one and two hours to reach court. Those living in surrounding areas served by Grantham Magistrates' Court, such as Stamford, would need to travel even further. Our members report that travel infrastructure is poor, particularly in the rural parts of the area, which would lead to even longer travel times for those without access to a car.

¹⁶ See *Hansard*, Thursday 17 September 2015, column 1275:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/chan46.pdf>

- **The Society recommends that Grantham Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Hinckley Magistrates' Court

- The Hinckley Magistrates' Court was built in 1999 at a cost to the taxpayer of £4.4 million. To close the court just over 15 years' later is a waste of public money.
- The consultation paper states that there is no separate access or waiting area for vulnerable or intimidated victims and witnesses at Hinckley Magistrates' Court. However, the Society understands that the proposed alternative venue, Leicester Magistrates' Court, also does not have a separate access or waiting area for vulnerable or intimidated victims and witnesses. The Society finds it difficult to understand why MoJ is proposing to close Hinckley and move cases to an older building that does not have significantly better facilities.
- Our members are also concerned that the travel times stated in the consultation paper are misleading and unrealistic. For example, weekday rush hour trains from Hinckley to Leicester can take up to 40 minutes depending on whether a change is necessary, and there is a 20 minute walk from the station to the court. There is also limited public parking for court users travelling by car as the car park at the court is only for the use of magistrates.
- The Society has had the benefit of seeing the response of Leicestershire Law Society and agrees with the points set out in that response.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Hinckley Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Kettering County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Kettering County Court.
- This court is one of just two county courts in Northamptonshire. Its closure would mean that the whole of the county would be served by just one court. In addition, 60 per cent of Kettering County Court users would have a journey time of over one hour to Northampton by public transport. This represents a significant reduction in access to justice.
- MoJ proposes to transfer Kettering County Court's workload to Northampton Crown Court, County Court and Family Court hearing centre. The consultation paper states that enabling works would be needed at Northampton to allow this, including the creation of a multi-jurisdictional open plan office, an additional courtroom and a centralised storage facility. MoJ has not specified the likely costs of those enabling works.
- **The Society would recommend that Kettering County Court remains open and that the money that would be spent on enabling works at Northampton be used to improve the facilities at Kettering. Alternatively, the Society would recommend that cases be transferred to Kettering Magistrates' Court.** The latter is currently open four days a week and operating at 64 per cent capacity – transferring cases from Kettering County Court there would mean that more efficient use could be made of Kettering Magistrates' Court and court services could be based in a central location in Kettering, thus maintaining local access to justice.

Kettering Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Kettering Magistrates' Court.
- Kettering is a busy court that deals with a range of adult and youth criminal matters as well as tribunal work. It has an utilisation rate of 64 per cent, which is significantly higher than the national average of 46 per cent. Kettering is also one of four magistrates' courts in Northamptonshire. The others are Corby, Wellingborough and Northampton. Corby Magistrates' Court is also proposed for closure. If Corby and Kettering were to close, Northamptonshire would be served by just two magistrates' courts. This would place additional strain on the two remaining courts and substantially reduce access to justice for court users, who would have to travel further to reach court. The consultation paper states that 86 per cent of users would need to travel for one to two hours by public transport to reach the proposed alternative of Wellingborough, compared to just 6 per cent of users currently. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society recommends that Kettering Magistrates Court remains open.**

Sandwell Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Sandwell Magistrates' Court.
- This court has good facilities. Three of the courtrooms have secure docks and there is direct access from the custody area to all courts. There are eight cells, three of which can accommodate category A prisoners. It is a purpose-built court that is utilised at 47 per cent capacity – above the national average for England and Wales.
- The Society has had the benefit of seeing the response of Birmingham Law Society and agrees with the points set out in that response. The Society notes that several of its members have located their offices specifically to meet the needs of clients appearing at Sandwell. Their businesses would suffer if the court this closed.
- **The Society recommends that Sandwell Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Shrewsbury Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Shrewsbury Magistrates' Court.
- This court was built in 1994 and its facilities are in good condition. There are separate waiting facilities for prosecution witnesses, two courtrooms with a secure dock, video link facilities for intimidated and vulnerable witnesses to give their evidence and five interview rooms available for private consultation. The court is compliant with the Equality Act 2010 and there are no security issues. The court serves an area which is mainly rural. If the court closes and cases are transferred to Telford, as proposed in the consultation, 71 per cent of users would have to travel for one to two hours to reach court. This would have a detrimental impact on access to justice. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society recommends that Shrewsbury Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Skegness Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Solihull Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. We understand that Solihull Magistrates' Court is no longer being used by HM Courts & Tribunals Service and that all magistrates' work was consolidated into Birmingham Magistrates' Court.

Stafford Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Worksop Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

North East

Consett Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Consett Magistrates' Court.
- As the consultation paper states, facilities at this court are good. There are baby changing facilities, disabled access and toilet facilities, two interview rooms, hearing enhancement facilities and refreshments are available. There are also five cells which are all operational, and the building is compliant with the Equality Act 2010.
- MoJ proposes to close Consett and transfer the custody work to Peterlee Magistrates' Court. The consultation paper states:

“Consett Magistrates' Court is situated 26 miles from Peterlee. The nearest train service runs from Stocksfield approximately seven miles from Consett. The travel time by train from Stocksfield to Seaham which is five miles from Peterlee is approximately one hour. The approximate cost of a return ticket is £12.40. Travel time by car is approximately 50 minutes.”

- However, our members have told us that:

“Stocksfield is...10 miles north of Consett. The only access to Stocksfield station from Consett is by car or taxi. There is no bus service from Consett to Stocksfield except via the Metro Centre interchange which would take 1 hr 43 minutes. To reach Peterlee from Seaham Rail station will involve a further taxi journey. Travel time by car from Consett to Peterlee may be approximately 50 minutes, but only in good traffic conditions. 1hr -1 ¼ hrs will need to be allowed in rush hours. There are several choices of routes, but whichever route is chosen there will be increased journey times in rush hour. Crossing Chester le Street involves crossing the A1 (M) where traffic can sometimes be stationary. Crossing Durham or navigating round Gateshead is very slow in rush hours. And traffic on the A19 frequently often grinds to a halt.”

- The closure of Consett would therefore present serious travel difficulties for local court users, which would be likely to have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable clients, those on low incomes and those travelling from rural areas, as set out in our main consultation response.
- The closure of this court would also have an impact on other agencies. The Crown Prosecution Service, National Probation Service and Citizens Advice Bureau all have rooms in the building. There are clear advantages to having these organisations housed in the same building, not least the fact that their travel time to court would be minimal. These organisations would need to find alternative accommodation if the court is closed and would face the same travel and cost difficulties as other court users.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Consett Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Halifax County Court and Family Court Halifax (Calderdale) Magistrates' and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposals to close Halifax (Calderdale) Magistrates' and Family Court ('Calderdale') and Halifax County Court and Family Court.
- Our members in Halifax are strongly opposed to these proposals. Whilst the consultation paper states that there are some concerns about the quality of the court accommodation, the Society understands that the building has disabled access and has recently had new technology installed. Closing these courts and transferring cases to Bradford would result in increased travelling time for court users and mean alternative accommodation would need to be found for other organisations that use the building, such as the Witness Service and Crown Prosecution Service. **The Society therefore recommends that these courts remain open.**
- **Alternatively**, if MoJ decides to go ahead with closing the County Court and Family Court in light of the consultation response, then **the Society would recommend that MoJ consider moving the County Court and Family Court into the Magistrates' Court.** The Society understands that the latter has an annex that is currently used as a youth court which may be able to be converted.

Hartlepool Magistrates' Court and County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Hartlepool Magistrates' Court and County Court.
- Hartlepool Magistrates' Court and County Court is one of just two magistrates' courts and two county courts operating in Cleveland. Closing this court would leave just one magistrates' court and one county court for this area, substantially reducing access to justice.
- If this court were to close, cases would be transferred to Teesside Magistrates' Court and Middlesbrough County Court. This would result in 91 per cent of court users having a journey time of one to two hours by public transport, compared with 0 per cent of users currently.
- Facilities at Hartlepool are good, as recognised in the consultation paper. The court has a prison video link and facilities for vulnerable witnesses to give evidence via video link to one courtroom. The court has separate waiting facilities for prosecution and defence witnesses. There are interview rooms available for private consultation. There is a counter system from 2pm until 5pm Monday to Friday. The court is also compliant with the Equality Act 2010 and there are no security issues. The consultation acknowledges that Teesside Magistrates' Court would need additional work in order to accommodate the Social Security and Child Support Tribunal work from Hartlepool County Court and to create an additional waiting room. MoJ has not specified the likely cost of this work.

- The consultation paper states that this court has an utilisation rate of 49 per cent. This is higher than the average utilisation rate for England and Wales of 46 per cent.¹⁷
- Finally, it is questionable whether closing this court would realise the financial benefit that MoJ anticipates. The consultation paper states that Hartlepool Magistrates' Court and County Court is a leasehold property and has a 99 year lease until 2075. The building is currently owned by Hartlepool Borough Council. Closing the court could result in MoJ having to break the lease, which would simply transfer the costs to the local authority.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Hartlepool Magistrates' Court and County Court remains open.**

Morpeth County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Morpeth County Court.
- Closing Morpeth County Court would have a serious impact on access to justice for individuals living in Northumberland. It would mean that the only court left in Northumberland would be Berwick Magistrates' Court, which only hears cases from Tuesday to Thursday. Court users would have to travel to Newcastle instead, which would mean 71 per cent of users travelling on public transport would have a journey time of one to two hours. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- Our members are concerned about that the extra workload from Morpeth would cause further delays and restrict prompt at Newcastle County Court. Members report that they are already seeing a considerable delay between issuing and trials being listed, re-listing of trials and delays in dealing with applications.
- **The Society recommends that Morpeth County Court remains open.**

Rotherham Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Rotherham Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court.
- This is a recently-built court with excellent facilities. It has ten courtrooms, two county court district judge chambers, 11 cells with secure access to eight courtrooms and interview rooms available for private consultation. In addition, there are facilities for vulnerable witnesses to give their evidence via video link to two courtrooms and separate waiting facilities for prosecution witnesses. The building is compliant with the Equality Act 2010 and there are no security issues. The Society finds it difficult to understand why MoJ is proposing to close a court with such good facilities.
- The closure of this court would also have an impact on other agencies The Crown Prosecution Service, National Probation Service, Citizens Advice Bureau and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) have rooms

¹⁷ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

within the building. There are clear advantages to having these organisations housed in the same building, not least the fact that their travel time to court will be minimal. These organisations would need to find alternative accommodation if the court is closed and face the same travel and cost difficulties as other court users.

- Closing this court would also increase travel times for court users. At the moment, between over 90 per cent of users can reach the court in under 30 minutes according to MoJ figures. Bus services in Rotherham are good so court users can afford to get to the court cheaply. This would not be the case if work is transferred to Sheffield.
- **For these reasons, the Society recommends that Rotherham Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court remains open.**

Scunthorpe Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Scunthorpe Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court.
- The consultation paper states that Scunthorpe operates at 30 per cent capacity. Our members are of the view that part of the reason for this low usage rate is that cases have been deliberately transferred to other courts over the years, which has created the impression that Scunthorpe is not busy. For example, many motoring cases are now heard in Hull.
- The facilities at Scunthorpe are good – there are three courtrooms, one hearing room and one county court district judge's chambers. There are 14 cells with secure access to three of the four courtrooms. There is a prison to court video link and facilities for vulnerable witnesses to give evidence via video link to two courtrooms. There is also a counter system that is open from 10am until 2pm, Monday to Friday.
- The consultation paper states that part of the building at Scunthorpe does not comply with the Equality Act 2010. It goes on to say that additional court accommodation would need to be created at the alternative court (Grimsby) to enable family and civil work to be consolidated there. The Society would suggest that it would be more sensible to use the money that would need to be spent on creating an additional hearing room at Grimsby on upgrading the facilities at Scunthorpe, allowing a local court to be maintained in the latter.
- As Nic Dakin MP explained in a backbench debate on 17 September 2015, Scunthorpe's Respect Court, which is aimed at reducing youth offending, is recognised as a leader in good practice in the country.¹⁸ The local magistracy has had a direct impact on reducing youth crime and re-offending in the area. This excellent work would be lost if the court is closed.
- The Scunthorpe judiciary includes two visually impaired magistrates. Closing the court would have a direct impact on the ability of those judges to participate in cases, which would contribute to reducing judicial diversity more widely, as well as reducing the number of magistrates in Scunthorpe.

¹⁸ See *Hansard*, Thursday 17 September 2015, column 1286:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/chan46.pdf>

- **The Society recommends that Scunthorpe remains open and that MoJ spends the money that would be used to upgrade Grimsby to upgrade the facilities at Scunthorpe instead.** This would help to preserve access to justice for local people.

Wakefield Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Wakefield Magistrates' Court.
- As the consultation paper acknowledges, Wakefield is a busy court, operating at 56 per cent capacity (higher than the England and Wales average utilisation rate of 49 per cent). Part of the reason for this is that the court absorbed the work from Pontefract Magistrates' Court when that court closed in 2010. It also has up-to-date technological facilities, such as prison to court video link.
- If Wakefield were to close, all criminal cases would be heard in Leeds Magistrates' Court. This would mean that all parties, including victims, witnesses, defendants, and solicitors would need to travel into Leeds. According to the consultation paper, 47 per cent of those court users would have to travel for over one hour in each direction to reach court by public transport. This reduces, rather than promotes, access to justice in the Wakefield area. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- Closing the court would also mean that alternative accommodation would need to be found for the Witness Service, National Probation Service and the Youth Offending Team, which have rooms within the building.
- **The Society recommends that Wakefield Magistrates' Court remains open.**

North West

In relation to closures in this region, the Society notes MoJ proposes to close eight courts in Altrincham, Bolton, Bury, Macclesfield, Oldham, Stockport, Tameside and Warrington and transfer work the work to Manchester Civil Justice Centre. Our members are concerned about the capacity of Manchester Civil Justice Centre to absorb such a high number of additional cases.

Accrington County Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. We understand that the proposed alternative court is easily accessible.

Accrington Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. We understand that the proposed alternative court is easily accessible.

Bolton County Court and Family Court

- The consultation paper states that, if the closure of Bolton goes ahead, cases would be transferred to Manchester Civil Justice Centre. This means that court users would have a round-trip of over 20 miles and 88 per cent of users would face increased journey times if travelling by public transport. Our members report that public transport in the area is poor:
- *"The travel times from Bolton into Manchester are extremely long due to poor public transport systems and congested roads. Getting from the outskirts of Bolton to use Bolton court is onerous enough. Buses are roughly one per hour in most suburbs of Bolton."*¹⁹
- The consultation paper also states that it is a 35 minute journey by car from Bolton to Manchester Civil Justice Centre. However, our members report that this journey takes, on average, an hour due to local traffic congestion. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- MoJ is also consulting on the integration of Bolton Magistrates' Court within Bolton Combined Court. This integration is dependant on the closure of Bolton County Court and Family Court. The latter is utilised for approximately 49 per cent of its capacity. The Society suggests that it would be more sensible to keep Bolton County Court and Family Court open *and* integrate the Magistrates' Court so that the building can operate at greater capacity. This would ensure access to local justice for individuals in the area. **The Society recommends that MoJ considers this suggestion.**
- Alternatively, our members have suggested that a better solution would be to keep Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court is open and transfer work from Bolton to Bury which is more easily accessible by car and bus. We discuss this in more detail below.

¹⁹ Survey respondent.

Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court.
- Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court serves Bury and the surrounding area. It is also the local court for Rochdale following the closure of Rochdale County Court in 1998 and the relocation of Rochdale Magistrates to Bury in 2010.
- Our members in the North West are strongly opposed to the closure of this court. We understand that local authorities in the area and local MPs are also opposed to the closure.
- As the consultation paper states, Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court is a purpose-built court that fully complies with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. Although the consultation paper states that the court operates at 51 per cent capacity, which is above average for England and Wales.²⁰
- It is difficult to understand why MoJ is proposing to close a purpose-built court and transfer the workload to Salford Magistrates Court' and Manchester County Court, both of which would require additional enabling work to provide similar facilities to Bury. The Society would suggest that, as this court is purpose-built, it would be difficult for MoJ to sell. There are also 55 staff permanently based at the court, which would mean high redundancy costs if those staff are to be made redundant.
- If the proposal to close this court goes ahead, 60 per cent of court users would have to travel from one to two hours to reach the court on public transport. This is an onerous journey, particularly for individuals with limited mobility and those who are travelling with children. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- Our members have suggested that a more sensible approach would be to keep Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court open, and transfer work from Bolton County Court and Family Court there, should the closure of the latter go ahead. Bury is only four miles from Bolton and much more accessible for local court users than Manchester Civil Justice Centre (the proposed alternative to Bolton). There is also good parking at Bury and the Society understands that local judges already travel from Bolton to Bury to conduct hearings. This would have the advantage of increasing the usage of Bury Magistrates Court and County Court, and ensuring that local people can access courts in their area.
- **The Society recommends that Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court remains open, and that MoJ considers moving work from Bolton County Court and Family Court there should the latter be closed.**

²⁰ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

Kendal Magistrates' Court and County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Kendal Magistrates' Court and County Court.
- Cumbria is a large rural county with significant pockets of social deprivation. Kendal is the main town in the South Lakes region, with decent transport links - it is served by rail, a motorway and good roads.
- Closing Kendal Magistrates' Court and County Court and moving the work to Barrow-in-Furness, on the west coast of the county, would have a significant negative impact on access to justice, particularly if the proposal to close West Cumbria Magistrates' Court and County Court goes ahead. The closure of these courts would mean that Cumbria would be left with just two magistrates' courts in Carlisle and Barrow.
- The consultation paper states that a rail journey from Kendal to Barrow-in-Furness takes between 1.5 and 2.5 hours, with two changes, at a cost of £25.90. There is only one bus per hour, which takes one hour 40 minutes. If Kendal Magistrates' Court and County Court are closed, 47 per cent of users would have a journey of over two hours to court, compared with just 16 per cent currently. This would have a particularly negative impact on those on low-incomes, who would not be able to afford the increased cost of the journey, and those with mobility issues, who would struggle with a more difficult journey. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response. Our members have raised concerns that defendants won't be able to afford to travel to court, which in turn would lead to more failures to attend court, a resultant rise in arrest warrants and police time being wasted in transporting people to court. There would also be cost implications for HMCTS, as the travelling expenses of victims, witnesses and jurors would increase substantially.
- These projected travel times do not take account of the local travel conditions. The road to Barrow-in-Furness is not good; in summer it is often congested with tourist traffic and can be inaccessible in winter due to inclement weather. These factors mean that car and bus journeys will often take longer than the times given in the consultation paper.
- As the consultation paper states, Kendal courthouse is compliant with the Equality Act 2010 and offers a good standard of accommodation. There are two courtrooms with secure docks and direct access from the secure cell area and a hearing room. The court has a public area with two private consultation rooms. Our members also report that Kendal Magistrates' Court and County Court provides an efficient, practical and friendly service. Importantly, it is the designated disabled court in Cumbria. If the court were to close, alternative provision for disabled defendants would need to be identified.
- The impact of the closure of this court on firms who have bid for a legal aid crime contract would be substantial, as Barrow is in an alternative procurement area to Kendal. The KPMG report highlighted the issues in Cumbria.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Kendal Magistrates' Court and County Court remains open.**

Macclesfield County Court and Macclesfield Magistrates' Court

- The consultation paper states that closing Macclesfield County Court and transferring the work to Manchester would result in 82 per cent of court users having to travel for one to two hours to reach court, compared to just one per cent currently.
- MoJ also proposes to close Macclesfield Magistrates' Court and transfer the workload to Crewe. This would result in 83 per cent of court users having to travel for one to two hours to reach court, compared to just seven per cent currently. There is no direct train from Manchester to Crewe.
- This would have a particularly negative impact on those on low incomes, who would not be able to afford the increased cost of the journey, and those with mobility issues who would struggle with a more difficult journey. Our members have raised concerns that defendants won't be able to afford to travel to court, which in turn would lead to more failures to attend court, a resultant rise in arrest warrants and police time being wasted in transporting people to court. There would also be cost implications for HMCTS, as the travelling expenses of victims, witnesses and jurors would increase substantially. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- The Society understands that these courts have some Equality Act and security issues as stated in the consultation paper but would argue preserving access to justice and ensuring that people can get to a local court is of paramount importance.
- In a backbench debate in the House of Commons on 17 September, Ann Coffey, MP for Stockport, suggested that it would be better to transfer the work from Macclesfield County Court and Macclesfield Magistrates' Court to Stockport Magistrates' Court and County Court, which is within easier reach for court users than Crewe.²¹ The Society believes that this is a pragmatic solution. A train journey from Macclesfield to Stockport takes between 12 and 22 minutes and costs £9.90 for an anytime day return.²² In comparison, the train journey from Macclesfield to Crewe takes 44 minutes to one hour and costs up to £16.90. The car journey from Macclesfield to Stockport is also shorter than the journey from Macclesfield to Crewe.
- If, in the light of the consultation responses, MoJ decides to close these two courts, then **the Society recommends that MoJ gives serious consideration to transferring the workload to Stockport Magistrates' Court and County Court.**

Oldham County Court and Oldham Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Ormskirk Magistrates' Court and Family Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

²¹ See *Hansard*, Thursday 17 September 2015, column 1274:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/chan46.pdf>

²² National Rail Enquiries website.

Runcorn (Halton) Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

St Helens Magistrates' Court and County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close St Helens Magistrates' Court and County Court. It is the only court in the St Helens justice area and operates at 62 per cent capacity. Our members, the local judiciary, local council leaders and local MPs strongly oppose the proposal to close this court.
- St Helens Courthouse was saved from closure in 2010 and upgraded at a cost of £1.7million in 2012. As the consultation paper states, the court has excellent modern facilities and complies with the Equality Act 2010. Part of the reason for the refurbishment was to ensure that the court could take cases from Knowsley after the court in Huyton closed.
- MoJ proposes to close St Helens and transfer the workload to Liverpool and Knowsley Magistrates' Court. If this proposal goes ahead, 64 per cent of court users would have to travel for between one to two hours to reach court by public transport, compared to one per cent currently. MoJ states that a car journey would take approximately 45 minutes and that a peak time train journey would take 35 minutes and cost £5.70.
- St Helens is an economically deprived area with one in five households having no working adult and 27 per cent of the population having no access to a private car. Many individuals using the St Helens' court would need to travel by public transport. As the court deals with family cases, individuals attending for such proceedings are likely to need to travel with children, thus increasing the cost of their journey.
- **The Society therefore recommends that St Helens Magistrates' Court and County Court remains open.** St Helens could be used as an alternative venue for cases from Warrington County Court should that court be closed. Please see our comments in relation to Warrington County Court below for more details.

Stockport Magistrates' Court and County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Stockport Magistrates' Court and County Court.
- Stockport Magistrates' Court and County Court is a recent, purpose-built courthouse. It complies with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and has 11 court and hearing rooms. It deals with a wide range of work and employs 47 members of staff.
- Closing this court would have a significant impact on access to justice in the area. Travel times for users would increase. The consultation paper states that 37 per cent of users would have a journey time of one to two hours to court should this court close, compared with 0 per cent of users currently. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- As set out above, in a backbench debate in the House of Commons on 17 September, Ann Coffey, MP for Stockport, suggested that it would be better to

transfer the work from Macclesfield County Court and Macclesfield Magistrates' Court to Stockport Magistrates' Court and County Court, which is within easier reach than Crewe.²³ The Society believes that this is a pragmatic solution. A train journey from Macclesfield to Stockport takes between 12 and 22 minutes and costs £9.90 for an anytime day return.²⁴ In comparison, the train journey from Macclesfield to Crewe takes 44 minutes to one hour and costs up to £16.90. The car journey from Macclesfield to Stockport is also shorter than the journey from Macclesfield to Crewe. As the consultation paper states, Stockport is currently operating at 54 per cent capacity – it therefore has additional capacity to absorb work from Macclesfield, should the proposed closure of courts there go ahead.

- **The Society recommends Stockport Magistrates' Court and County Court remains open and that MoJ transfers work from Macclesfield to this court should the closures in Macclesfield go ahead.**

Tameside County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Tameside County Court.
- Tameside County Court is co-located with Tameside Magistrates' Court in a modern purpose built building, and has eight hearing rooms, two of which are used by the county court. The building complies with the Equality Act 2010.
- The proposal is that the County Court will close, yet the Magistrates' Court, which is in the same building, would remain open. The consultation states that closing Tameside would allow work from Oldham Magistrates Court to be transferred to Tameside (assuming that Oldham is closed).
- This feels unnecessary and illogical. If, as the consultation paper states, Tameside is currently operating at 44 per cent capacity with both a Magistrates Court and County Court running in the current building, then in theory it has the capacity to absorb work from Oldham. **The Society therefore recommends that Tameside County Court remains open.**

Trafford Magistrates' Court and Altrincham County Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Warrington County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Warrington County Court.
- Warrington County Court is co-located with Warrington Crown Court to form the Warrington Combined Court. It has five hearing rooms. The accommodation is of a good standard with disabled access and meets the minimum requirements of the Equality Act 2010.
- Closing this court would have a significant negative impact on access to justice in the area. If the court closed, 73 per cent of users would have a journey time of one to two

²³ See *Hansard*, Thursday 17 September 2015, column 1274:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/chan46.pdf>

²⁴ National Rail Enquiries website.

hours by public transport to the proposed alternative court. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.

- The consultation paper states that closing this court would enable work from Runcorn (Halton) and Warrington Magistrates' Courts to be transferred there. However, the consultation also states that Warrington County Court is operating at 65 per cent capacity. This suggests that there is spare capacity for additional work to be transferred there without closing the court.
- **The Society would recommend that Warrington County Court remains open and that MoJ transfer work from Runcorn (Halton) and Warrington Magistrates' Courts there to use the spare capacity.** This would have the advantage of making more efficient use of the court estate in Warrington and maintaining local access to justice.
- **Alternatively**, if Warrington County Court does not have the capacity to absorb cases from both Runcorn (Halton) and Warrington Magistrates' Courts, or if MoJ decides to proceed with the closure of Warrington in light of the consultation responses, then **the Society recommends that the work of Warrington County Court be transferred to St Helens Magistrates' Court and County Court instead of Liverpool or Manchester.** Doing so would enable spare capacity to be used at St Helens' and help to preserve local access to justice, as St Helens' is closer to Warrington (a 25 minute car journey or approximately 35 minutes by bus.²⁵)

West Cumbria Magistrates' Court and County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close West Cumbria Magistrates' Court and County Court.
- This closure would have a huge impact on access to justice in Cumbria. West Cumbria Magistrates' Court and County is the only one left in West Cumbria following the closure of Whitehaven Magistrates' Court and Whitehaven County Court in 2011. If this closure, and the proposed closure of courts in Kendal, were to go ahead, Cumbria would be left with just two magistrates' courts in Carlisle and Barrow.
- Transferring the work to Carlisle would mean that 43 per cent of the population would face a journey time of more than 2 hours using public transport and 58 per cent would have to travel between one to two hours by car. As stated above, Cumbria is a largely rural area with large pockets of social deprivation. Many court users would not be able to afford the increased journey cost. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court. In rural areas like Cumbria, even where people have a car, bad weather or traffic conditions can make driving in rural areas exceptionally difficult at certain times of the year – roads may become impassable in winter or congested with tourist traffic in summer, considerably slowing down travel. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on

²⁵ <https://www.arrivabus.co.uk/north-west/services/329---st-helens-to-warrington/?direction=outbound>

court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.

- **The Society recommends that MoJ keeps West Cumbria Magistrates' Court and County Court open.**

South East

Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court.
- Closing this court would have a severe impact on access to justice for local people. As the consultation paper states, there is no direct train between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes (the proposed alternative venue). The travel time by rail would be 2.5 hours, involving a change in London. The cost of a return train ticket is £71.30 – completely out of financial reach for court users on low incomes or in receipt of welfare benefits. The journey would be even more expensive for court users who have to travel with children for family cases. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response..
- MoJ proposes to use this closure to-relocate Aylesbury Crown Court. The Society understands that the Crown Court is an outdated building and in need of updating. Given that Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court has spare capacity and better facilities, the Society would suggest that MoJ consider keeping this court open and transfer the Crown Court work there to use up the spare capacity.
- **The Society recommends that Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court remain open.**

Basildon Social Security and Child Support Tribunal (Acorn House)

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Bedford and Mid Beds Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Bedford County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bedford and Mid Beds Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Bedford County Court and Family Court.
- If this court closes, court users would need to travel for 30 to 45 minutes to reach Luton Court instead. A return train ticket is £15.60, which those on low incomes may struggle to afford. As Bedford deals with a substantial amount of family cases, our members are particularly concerned about the impact of longer, more costly journeys on parents who need to travel with children for care proceedings, who would have to buy more than one ticket. Such parents may have to seek funding for their journey from social services or seek legal aid. These additional hurdles may discourage them from attending at all. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of court users, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court.
- **The Society recommends that Bedford and Mid Beds Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Bedford County Court and Family Court remain open.**

Bicester Magistrates' Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bicester Magistrates' Court and Family Court.
- As the consultation paper states, this court is one of three magistrates' and family courts in Oxfordshire. Bicester currently has a population of just over 30,000 but has been designated as a new 'Garden Town' by the government, which aims to build 13,000 homes there.²⁶ Bicester's population is therefore likely to grow. The town is also a commercial hub for the substantial population living in Banbury to the north, and Oxford to the south. A huge number of people live in, and travel to and from, Bicester. The Society would suggest that such an important urban area needs a local court.
- Court attendees from rural areas already travel a considerable distance to reach court in Bicester. If the Magistrates' Court and Family Court is closed, 71 per cent of court users would have to travel from one to two hours by public transport to reach an alternative court. Bicester is the main family court for Oxfordshire with people attending from all over the county. Those living, for example, in the north of the county already incur significant travelling time and cost in attending which would only be increased by having to extend journeys to Oxford. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of court users, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court.
- **The Society recommends that Bicester Magistrates' Court and Family Court remains open.**

Bury St. Edmunds Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Bury St. Edmunds Crown Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bury St. Edmunds Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Bury St. Edmunds Crown Court.
- MoJ is proposing to close this court and Lowestoft Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court. Closing these courts in Bury St Edmunds and Lowestoft would mean that the whole of Suffolk, a large rural area, would be served by just one courthouse in Ipswich. The latter court would then serve an area of 1,466 square miles. For magistrates' cases, approximately 89 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour to reach court in Ipswich, and 88 per cent of users in family cases would have similar journey lengths. This is a huge reduction in access to justice in Suffolk.
- Our members are particularly concerned about the impact of closing courts in Bury St Edmunds on clients who are on low incomes, many of whom do not have access to a private car or the financial means to afford the cost of train tickets. Our members say that the court provides a vital local service. As one solicitor stated:

"The Bury St Edmunds Family Court provides an invaluable service for families trying to resolve difficult and very emotional matters and to close the

²⁶ <http://www.cherwell.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=10371>

*court will lead to further distress, both emotional and financial, for families in these very difficult times.*²⁷

- As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court.
- Whilst members recognise that some improvements could be made to the courts in Bury, they are also concerned about whether Ipswich could cope with the additional workload, and whether its facilities are adequate.
- **For these reasons, the Society recommends that Bury St. Edmunds Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Bury St. Edmunds Crown Court remain open.**

Chichester Combined Court (Crown and County) and Chichester Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Chichester Combined Court (Crown and County) and Chichester Magistrates' Court.
- Our members are particularly concerned about the impact of this closure on access to justice in the local area. They are also concerned that the travel time data given in the consultation paper is misleading. Members highlighted poor road and rail infrastructure in their responses to the Society's survey. One solicitor explained:

"We have very poor road connections in all directions from Chichester all of which are highly used and congested for much of the time. The Government recently acknowledged that the A27 should be a priority for infrastructure investment. The road journey times quoted by the MOJ I have seen are entirely unachievable during a normal day. Our rush hours start early so the roads are particularly busy at the time most court users would need to use them to attend other courts outside the area. Not many years ago, there was a proposal to close our A & E Department and Maternity at the Chichester St Richards Hospital. The idea was to take patients to Portsmouth or Worthing for treatment. Those proposals also prompted many objections on the grounds of road congestion and journey times and the proposals were abandoned.

*Our rail company, Southern, is one of the worst performers and trains are often delayed or cancelled. Trains are not fast, fares are high, and many court users could not use off peak fares because they would have to travel early in the day. The earlier trains are often packed to capacity too. Buses struggle with the congestion of course and are very slow along the coast, with many stops and detours.*²⁸

- Court users in remote rural locations already have difficulties reaching court in Chichester. These difficulties would be exacerbated if Chichester courts are closed and would make it extremely difficult for court users in surrounding areas, such as Selsey, to reach a court. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court.

²⁷ Survey respondent.

²⁸ Survey respondent.

- The consultation paper states that Chichester Combined Court is currently operating at 78 per cent capacity – far above the average utilisation rate of 46 per cent for courts in England and Wales.²⁹ It is a busy court and our members report that waiting rooms are often crowded and interview rooms fully booked.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Chichester Combined Court (Crown and County) and Chichester Magistrates' Court remain open.**

Colchester County Court and Family Court and Colchester County Court Offices

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Colchester County Court and Family Court and Colchester County Court Offices. The County and Family Court operates at 58 per cent capacity (above average for England and Wales). Colchester Courts are used by court users in surrounding rural areas, such as Tendring. Those court users would face substantially longer and more expensive journeys if the court closes; 86 per cent of users would have to travel for one to two hours by public transport to reach the alternative court. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court.
- **The Society recommends that these courts remain open.**
- However, if MoJ decides to proceed with closure in the light of consultation responses, the Society would recommend that the family workload from Colchester County Court and Family Court should be relocated to Colchester Magistrates' and Family Court, rather than Chelmsford, in order to reduce the impact of longer travelling times on court users.

Dartford Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns from our members in relation to this proposal. We understand that listings have been reduced to one day a week. However, the Society would raise concerns about the impact of this closure on local court users. Public transport in Kent is poor and train tickets are expensive, particularly in peak time. As the consultation paper states, 85 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour to reach court.

Dover Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Dover Magistrates' Court.
- Our members are particularly concerned about the impact of this proposed closure on clients who are on low incomes. Public transport in Kent is poor and train tickets are expensive, particularly in peak time. As the consultation paper states, 67 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour to reach court. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly

²⁹ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

those on low incomes, to attend court. **In light of these concerns, the Society recommends that Dover Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Eastbourne Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Eastbourne Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court.
- Our members are concerned that the utilisation rate of 38 per cent given in the consultation paper is misleading and does not take into account that the usage will change as of October 2015 when fast track cases for Sussex are transferred to Eastbourne. Our members tell us that this court is already very busy, with 50 to 60 possession cases heard each month and considerable waiting times for hearings. Members are also concerned about the impact that taking on additional work would have on the proposed alternative courts of Hastings and Brighton, especially as the latter already has a backlog of work. Finally, our members praise the court staff in Eastbourne and argue that closing the court would mean losing an efficient, knowledgeable and experienced team.
- Closing this court would also significantly reduce access to justice. The proposed alternative venue is Hastings or Brighton, both approximately 20 miles away. The travel times in the consultation paper do not take account of local road conditions or the fact that roads to those locations are often congested in summer due to tourist traffic. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society recommends that Eastbourne Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court remain open.**

Harlow Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

King's Lynn County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close King's Lynn County Court and Family Court.
- This courthouse serves a large rural area. Closing it would mean a significant reduction in local access to justice. The travel times stated in the consultation paper do not take sufficient account of local geography and the difficulties of travelling to the proposed alternative venue, Norwich Combined Court. The consultation paper acknowledges that 40 per cent of court users would have to travel over two hours to reach a court if Kings Lynn closed. As one solicitor explained:

"Norwich is the other side to King's Lynn and very difficult to get to first thing in the morning with traffic. It is really 1hr 45min to get through traffic, park and as the court demand people get there an hour before - it has not been thought through."³⁰

³⁰ Survey respondent.

- The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society recommends that King’s Lynn County Court and Family Court remains open.**
- The Society understands that Henry Bellingham MP, MP for North West Norfolk, has suggested that King’s Lynn Town Hall might be a suitable alternative venue for the court. The Society reiterates the concerns set out in the main consultation response about the suitability of public venues for use as a court.

Lowestoft Magistrates’ Court, County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Lowestoft Magistrates’ Court, County Court and Family Court.
- MoJ is proposing to close this court, Bury St. Edmunds Magistrates’ Court and Family Court and Bury St. Edmunds Crown Court. Closing courts in both of these towns would mean that the whole of Suffolk, a large rural area, would be served by just one courthouse in Ipswich. The latter court would then serve an area of 1,466 square miles. For magistrates’ cases, approximately 89 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour to reach court in Ipswich, and 88 per cent of users in family cases would have similar journey lengths. This represents a huge reduction in access to justice in Suffolk.
- Our members are concerned about the impact of the closures on clients, who would face substantially longer journey times to Norwich or Great Yarmouth instead. As one solicitor explained:

“On the map the distance between Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth (the proposed court) seems small but the journey time is substantial -up to an hour and the public transport links to Great Yarmouth from the southern parts of the Lowestoft area are poor. There will be an impact on witnesses and defendants - particularly those without cars. If witnesses’ and defendants’ ability to arrive at court punctually is affected by the closures then there will be a significant knock on effect on court efficiency. Perhaps the MoJ should consider the issue of travel warrants to witnesses in appropriate cases. Where witnesses are reliant on public transport and have child care issues then there is a real concern that their ability to attend on a minor case will be dictated by pressures of travel time.”

- The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- Lowestoft Magistrates’ Court is in a readily accessible location near to other justice agencies, such as the Norfolk and Suffolk Probation Trust and Lowestoft Police Station. Retaining Lowestoft Magistrates’ Court, County Court and Family Court could help to create a ‘justice hub’, centralising key local justice services in Lowestoft.

- **For these reasons, the Society recommends that Lowestoft Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court remain open.**

Redhill Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Reigate County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Redhill Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Reigate County Court and Family Court.
- Closing Redhill Magistrates' Court would leave the east of Surrey without any access to local justice following the closure of Woking Magistrates' Court in 2010. Court users in Horley and Reigate would have significantly longer journeys – over 82 per cent would need to travel for over one hour to reach court under the proposals. There is no direct bus service between Redhill and Guildford (where the alternative court is located). Court users living in rural areas would need to take more than one bus, substantially increasing the risk of delay and late arrival at court. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- Members are also concerned about whether the alternative courts at Guildford and Staines have the capacity to take on additional cases, especially as Redhill and Reigate Courts are operating at 49 per cent capacity (above average for England and Wales).
- **The Society recommends that Redhill Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Reigate County Court and Family Court remain open.**

St Albans County Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close St Albans County Court.
- St Albans is not under-utilised, as MoJ suggests. It operates at 65 per cent capacity – above average for courts in England and Wales. It is one of three courts in Hertfordshire – a large, rural county that is geographically difficult to travel around by car or public transport. This is reflected in MoJ's own travel estimates, which show that 65 per cent of court users would have to travel for over one hour to reach court by public transport should this proposal go ahead. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society recommends that St Albans County Court remains open.**

Tunbridge Wells County Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Tunbridge Wells County Court and Family Court.
- Closing this court would significantly reduce access to justice for local people in Kent. Public transport in Kent is poor and train tickets are expensive, particularly in peak time. As the consultation paper states, 67 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour to reach court. As the consultation paper recognises, there is no direct bus service from Tunbridge Wells to Canterbury, Chatham or Canterbury and the bus

to Maidstone takes 1 hour and 20 minutes. Train tickets range in price from £9.50 return to £41.70 return – this is entirely out of financial reach for court users on low incomes or who are in receipt of benefits. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.

- Our members are also concerned that the utilisation rate of 17 per cent stated in the consultation paper is misleading. The Society understands that this figure does not take hearing room usage into account, and that four courts sit daily.
- **The Society recommends that Tunbridge Wells County Court and Family Court remains open.**

Watford Magistrates' Court and Family Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

West Berkshire (Newbury) Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal by its members.

South West

Barnstaple Crown Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Barnstaple Crown Court.
- Closing this court would have a detrimental impact on access to justice in Devon. The consultation paper states that, if Barnstaple Crown Court closes, court users would need to travel for over two hours by public transport to reach Exeter Combined Court instead. That is unacceptable and unduly arduous, particularly for individuals on low incomes, those with mobility issues, and those living in rural parts of the county who would face even more difficult journeys. As set out in our main consultation response, longer, more expensive journeys could have a serious impact on the ability and willingness of victims, witnesses, defendants and jurors, particularly those on low incomes, to attend court.
- The consultation paper states that no sittings have taken place at Barnstaple since early 2012. However, our members report that this is inaccurate and that trials have already been listed to take place at Barnstaple in March 2016 due to a backlog in work at Exeter. The Society understands that a family court for first hearings directions appointments, at which a CAFCASS duty officer is present, is held one day a week at Barnstaple.
- The Society notes that MoJ is proposing to close Barnstaple and transfer cases to Exeter Combined Court. Given that our members tell us that Exeter already has a backlog of cases, we question whether that court has the capacity to take on additional work.
- The consultation paper states that there were no operating costs for Barnstaple in 2014/15. Closing the court would therefore realise very limited savings for MoJ.
- **The Society suggests that it would be more sensible to keep Barnstaple open and transfer cases from Exeter to it, thus alleviating the backlogs at the latter.** Maintaining Barnstaple Crown Court would also promote access to justice for local people. It would also represent a saving for the Legal Aid Agency, HMCTS and other organisations, as solicitors and other court users would not have to travel (and claim expenses for) long and costly journeys to Exeter.

Bath Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court and/or North Avon (Yate) Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bath Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court.
- Closing this court would create severe transport difficulties for court users. The consultation paper states that 62 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour on public transport to reach Bristol Magistrates' Court instead. This presents particular difficulties for court users living in rural areas, where public transport in the region is limited. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.

- The consultation paper states that Bristol Magistrates' Court could only cope with extra workload from either Bath or North Avon (Yate) Magistrates' Court.
- Bath Magistrates' Court is a purpose-built court in a good state of repair. It has video link facilities and meets the average utilisation rate for England and Wales of 46 per cent.³¹ It is the centralised road traffic court for the region and deals with criminal adult and youth cases. It also accommodates the National Probation Service. The County and Family Court deals with civil money claims, housing possession cases, bankruptcy and contested divorce and family cases.
- North Avon (Yate) is an older court that deals with a smaller range of work.
- **On this basis, the Society would recommend that, if it is not possible for both courts to remain open, that MoJ retains Bath Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court.**

Bournemouth Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bournemouth Magistrates' Court.
- Our members are concerned about the impact that closing this court would have on access to justice in Dorset. Eleven courts have closed in Dorset in recent years.³² Closing Bournemouth would further undermine access to justice locally. They are also concerned about the ability of the proposed alternative court, Poole Magistrates' Court, to cope with extra cases being transferred.
- Closing this court would have a serious impact have on the legal aid tender process. Several defence solicitor firms who tendered for the new duty solicitor contracts have done so on the basis that the police custody suite and Magistrates' Court were in central Bournemouth near to their offices. Some members have told us that they would not have tendered for contracts in the area had they known that Bournemouth Magistrates' Court might be closed. The Society is concerned that its members may now be financially unable to fulfil the terms of their contract due to circumstances which are entirely beyond their control, which would have a detrimental effect on their businesses. This could leave people who qualify for legal aid unable to access legal advice in some areas.
- The consultation paper gives a travel time to Poole Magistrates' Court of approximately 15 minutes by car. However, the Society understands that the minimum travel time for travelling across the conurbation is at least 30 minutes and longer at peak times. In addition, there is no off-site car parking at Poole Civic Centre in public car parks for the duration of court proceedings and parking in adjacent roads is restricted to residents. On public transport, 50 per cent of users would have a journey of one to two hours to reach court, compared to just 21 per cent of users currently.
- The consultation paper states that in 2014/15, this court was utilised for 52 per cent of its capacity – above the average utilisation rate of 46 per cent for courts across

³¹ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

³² Christchurch, Wimborne, Wareham, Blandford Forum, Gillingham, Swanage, Shaftesbury, Sturminster Newton, Dorchester, Sherborne and Bridport.

England and Wales.³³ It is already a busy court. Given that recorded crime in Dorset rose by 12 per cent in 2015, the Society would suggest that it is likely that the court would be even busier in future should it remain open.

- Closing this court would also have a negative impact on other organisations using the building. As the consultation paper recognises, this court is also used for the local Coroner's Court – alternative facilities would need to be found for the latter should this building be closed.
- The Society has had the benefit of seeing a copy of Bournemouth and District Law Society and Dorset Law Society's joint response to the consultation, and would support the points raised in that response. **The Society specifically supports the recommendation of those law societies that MoJ assess the cost of updating and refurbishment of Bournemouth Magistrates Court and Coroners Court into a modern facility on the existing central site, which is adjacent to the police station and the majority of local solicitors' offices.** This would have the advantage of maintaining access to justice for local people.

Cheltenham Rivershill House Tribunal

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Cheltenham Rivershill House Tribunal. This Tribunal is currently the only dedicated tribunals hearing venue in Gloucestershire. To close this tribunal would undermine local justice, as 48 per cent of court users would need to travel for over two hours to reach the alternative venue in Gloucester. **If MoJ decides to proceed with the closure of this tribunal in light of the consultation responses, the Society would recommend that an alternative venue is sought in Cheltenham, in order to maintain local access to justice.**

Chippenham Magistrates' Court, Civil Court and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Chippenham Magistrates' Court, Civil Court and Family Court.
- Following the closure of Trowbridge County Court in 2010, cases were transferred from that court to Chippenham. MoJ now states that Chippenham is not busy enough, even though it is utilised at 40 per cent capacity – not far off the average 46 per cent utilisation rate for courts in England and Wales.³⁴ If Chippenham were to close, cases would be transferred to Swindon and 66 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour by public transport to reach court. This would represent a considerable blow to access to justice in Wiltshire. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- As the consultation paper recognises, Chippenham courthouse is in good condition throughout, with no security, health and safety or Equality Act 2010 issues. It also provides accommodation for other local agencies, such as the Crown Prosecution Service, Witness Service and National Probation Service. Those agencies would need to find alternative accommodation if Chippenham closes.

³³ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

³⁴ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

- For these reasons, the Society recommends that Chippenham courthouse should stay open.

Dorchester Crown Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Dorchester Crown Court.
- Closing Dorchester Crown Court and moving work to Bournemouth Combined Court would significantly increase travel time for jurors, victims and witnesses, as well as professional court users, and seriously affect access to justice. According to the consultation paper, 73 per cent would have to travel for over two hours on public transport to reach court, which is unnecessarily onerous. The consultation paper states that road links between Dorchester and east Bournemouth are good, but our members have said that this is misleading as the roads are very congested during peak time. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- The consultation paper states that Dorchester Crown Court is utilised at 67 per cent capacity. This utilisation rate is significantly higher than the average for courts in England and Wales (46 per cent³⁵) and reflects the fact that it is a busy court that serves a high local demand. Given that recorded crime in Dorset rose by 12 per cent in 2015, the Society would suggest that it is likely that the court would be even busier in future should it remain open.
- The Society understands that 11 courts have closed in Dorset in recent years.³⁶ Closing Dorchester Crown Court would further undermine access to justice locally and increase pressure on other local courts.
- The Society has had the benefit of seeing a copy of Bournemouth and District Law Society and the Dorset Law Society's joint response to the consultation, and would support the points raised in that response. **Specifically, the Society supports the recommendation that MoJ should invest in upgrading the building to make it compliant with the Equality Act 2010 to enable the court to remain open.**

Fareham Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Gloucester Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

³⁵ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

³⁶ Christchurch, Wimborne, Wareham, Blandford Forum, Gillingham, Swanage, Shaftesbury, Sturminster Newton, Dorchester, Sherborne and Bridport.

Stroud Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Torquay Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Torquay Magistrates' Court and transfer the work to Newton Abbot or Plymouth. The Society recommends that MoJ consider an alternative solution, as set out below.
- Closing this court and moving work to Newton Abbey County Court would significantly increase travel time for jurors, victims and witnesses, as well as professional court users, and seriously affect access to justice. According to the consultation paper, 52 per cent of court users would have to travel for over two hours on public transport to reach court in Newton Abbot, which is unnecessarily onerous. Journey times would also be increased for users whose case is transferred to Plymouth Magistrates Court - 38 per cent would have to travel for over one hour to get there from Torquay. Any court user needing to reach Plymouth by 9:00am would have to leave Torquay before 7:00am if using public transport. Travelling to Plymouth from Torquay is also costly for those on low incomes. Parking at Plymouth Magistrates' Court is also much more limited than that available at Torquay, which has public parking at the court and further parking within 500 metres of the court. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- The consultation paper states that Torquay Magistrates' Court is utilised at 62 per cent capacity. This utilisation rate is significantly higher than the average for courts in England and Wales (46 per cent³⁷) and reflects the fact that it is a busy court that serves a high local demand.
- In a backbench debate in the House of Commons on 17 September, Kevin Foster, MP for Torbay, explained that the custody suite at Torquay police station is busy.³⁸ Having a Magistrates' Court in Torquay means that defendants can be transported swiftly to a local court. If the proposed closure goes ahead, police and probation staff would have to transport defendants to Plymouth, which is nearly an hour away by car. The Society suggests that is an inefficient use of police time and resources.
- **The Society recommends that Torquay Magistrates' Court remains open.**
- The Society understands that the local county court, Torquay and Newton Abbot County Court and Family Court, has modern facilities, including disabled access and free parking. **The Society would recommend that, if Torquay Magistrates' Court is closed following the end of the consultation, then it would be more sensible to move the Magistrates' Court work to the county court.** Any money saved from closing the Magistrates' Court could then be used to upgrade the county court and create a central location for court proceedings in the area.

³⁷ Written question 9762, 17 September 2015, Iain Wright MP:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-09-09/9762/>

³⁸ See *Hansard*, Thursday 17 September 2015, column 1287:
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/chan46.pdf>

Wales

Brecon Law Courts

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Brecon Law Courts.
- This proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the inadequate transport infrastructure in Wales. Brecon and the surrounding area are rural and court users would face real difficulties if they are required to travel to Llandrindod Wells, Merthyr Tydfil and Swansea instead of Brecon. As one solicitor explained:

“While it is a 35 minute bus journey from Brecon to Merthyr Tydfil, the buses run at irregular intervals of between one and two hours. A client wishing to get to Merthyr for 10:00 am must catch the 08:38 bus from Brecon. Someone living in one of the villages outside Brecon has therefore to catch a very early bus. For example, a person living in Talgarth (8 miles from Brecon) wishing to attend an all day hearing at 10:00 am would have to leave Talgarth by about 08:00 and if they were not able to catch the 16:50 Brecon bus from Merthyr would be too late for the last bus of the day to Talgarth. The same difficulties would apply to travel to Llandrindod Wells.”³⁹

- Our members are concerned that, although the consultation paper refers to nearby courts, including Merthyr Tydfil, cases would in fact be transferred to Llandrindod Wells because it is in the same county as Brecon, whereas Merthyr Tydfil is in Glamorgan.
- Such onerous journeys could lead to victims, witnesses and claimants being reluctant, or in some cases, entirely unable to attend court. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response. Vulnerable clients and those on low incomes would struggle to cope with increased costs and travel times. Magistrates’, solicitors, custody services and other court users would also have more difficult journeys. There is also a real risk that defendants would be unable to attend due to travel difficulties; this would lead to arrest warrants being issued and more work for the police who would have to collect and transport defendants to court.
- **The Society recommends that Brecon Law Courts remain open.** Closing this court would seriously damage access to justice in Brecon.

Bridgend Law Courts

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Bridgend Law Courts.
- This proposal has surprised many of our members in south Wales, who find it difficult to understand why the proposal could not have been announced before 5 May 2015. Criminal solicitors in the area are concerned about the impact of the proposed closure on the legal aid tender process. Applicants based their tender on Bridgend Law Courts being open and operating as usual. The Legal Aid Agency had even produced sample rotas for south Wales, which included Bridgend Law Courts. We know of at least one firm that has opened a branch office and spent money on advertising based on there being a court in Bridgend. Had the proposed closure of

³⁹ Survey respondent.

Bridgend Law Courts been announced far sooner, firms may not have engaged in finding delivery partners or opened in Cardiff instead.

- The proposal also does not take sufficient account of local geography. Bridgend covers a large residential area from Pyle to Llantrisant and the Maesteg and Ogwr valleys. It is already extremely difficult for people from those areas to reach Bridgend Law Courts. It would be even harder for them to reach the alternative courts in Cardiff or Port Talbot – over 32 per cent of users would have to travel for over one hour by public transport, which is unreliable in the area. From a criminal case perspective, if Bridgend Law Courts closes, offences committed in place such as Pyle would be prosecuted in Cardiff Magistrates' Court, which undermines the principle of local justice.
- In addition, this court was refurbished in 2014. The consultation paper says that the accommodation is of a good standard; it has five courtrooms, eight secure cells, two secure docks and a video link room. There are 12 interview rooms. The court operates at 50 per cent capacity, which is above average for England and Wales.
- **The Society therefore recommends that Bridgend Law Courts remain open.**

Carmarthen Civil, Family, Tribunal and Probate Hearing Centre and Carmarthen Law Courts (The Guildhall)

- The Society disagrees with the proposals to close Carmarthen Civil, Family, Tribunal and Probate Hearing Centre ('Carmarthen Hearing Centre') and Carmarthen Law Courts (The Guildhall).
- Carmarthen Hearing Centre was set up in 2012 and our members report that it has a very efficient set up. Carmarthen Law Courts underwent refurbishment in 2010 and 2011. Closing these courts would represent a significant waste of public money.
- Members report that the proposed alternative court at Llanelli is not as efficient or modern. It is also some distance from the train station and difficult to find if you are not familiar with Llanelli. Clients with disabilities would face grave difficulties if the court moves to Llanelli. In contrast, the facilities for disabled people at Carmarthen Hearing Centre are excellent.
- Closing Carmarthen Hearing Centre would also significantly affect access to justice. Many of the staff based here are Welsh speakers, which is important in a predominantly Welsh-speaking community.
- Access to justice would also be reduced due to the nature of the journey to the alternative courts. Court users would have a 100 mile round trip to Aberystwyth (to which there is no direct rail link), a 60 mile round trip to Haverfordwest or a complicated journey to Llanelli. The bus and train service in the area is infrequent, unreliable and expensive. Although the consultation paper that it is a 30 minute train journey from Carmarthen to Llanelli, the service does not run frequently. Transferring cases to Aberystwyth would also make it extremely difficult for clients to reach court. Parking is extremely difficult in Aberystwyth for those travelling by car. Family cases in particular can be stressful and requiring clients involved in family matters to travel further would only make a stressful situation much worse. In addition, Carmarthen Hearing Centre serves a large area (in excess of 20 miles) even though Carmarthen itself is not densely populated. Therefore, whilst it might be 17 miles from Carmarthen town to Llanelli, a court user based in a village like Felindre in

Carmarthenshire would have to reach Carmarthen (15 miles away) before starting their onward journey to Llanelli, so their journey would be even longer.

- The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response. Vulnerable clients and those on low incomes would struggle to cope with increased costs and travel times. Solicitors, social services, custody services and other court users would also have more difficult journeys.
- **The Society recommends that Carmarthen Civil, Family, Tribunal and Probate Hearing Centre and Carmarthen Law Courts (the Guildhall) should remain open.**

Dolgellau Crown and Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposals to close Dolgellau Crown and Magistrates' Court.
- MoJ is proposing to close Dolgellau Crown and Magistrates' Court and transfer hearings to Caernarfon Criminal Justice Centre. This proposal does not take sufficient account of the character of the local area, which is largely rural and has a significant Welsh-speaking population. Court users would have to make an 86 mile round trip to Caernarfon if this closure goes ahead. The consultation paper has "no data" for how long the journey times of 67 per cent of court users would take. Our members have pointed out the extreme difficulties that clients would face in trying to reach court. One solicitor explained:

"No trains run from Dolgellau/Barmouth/Harlech etc to Caernarfon. Taxi fares would likely be in the region of between £60 to £90 each way."

- Such onerous and expensive journeys could lead to victims, witnesses and claimants being reluctant, or in some cases, entirely unable to attend court. Vulnerable clients and those on low-incomes would struggle to cope with increased costs and travel times. Closing Dolgellau Crown and Magistrates' Court would therefore seriously damage access to justice in the area.
- **The Society recommends that this court stays open.**

Holyhead Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Holyhead Magistrates' Court.
- This closure would have a significant impact on local people and businesses in Anglesey and Gwynedd. Holyhead is the largest population centre on Anglesey. Holyhead Magistrates' Court is one of just two courts in Anglesey and provides a full range of magistrates' services. If the court closes, court users would need to travel to Caernarfon Criminal Justice Centre instead. The consultation paper states that 79 per cent of court users would have to travel for over one hour by public transport to reach Caernarfon. In fact, this journey involves a bus journey from Holyhead to Bangor, a change in Bangor and then onwards to Caernarfon. The Society understands that this journey is not possible in less than an hour and 30 minutes, and this is based on the assumption that services run on time and are not cancelled, which is often not the case.

- The cost of travelling to Caernarfon is another concern for clients. A bus journey from Holyhead to Caernarfon will cost approximately £10.00. Many clients in this area are in receipt of welfare benefits, some of whom receive approximately £52.00 a week. If a client is required to attend court on more than one occasion for the same case, it would cause significant financial difficulties. Our members report that it is already difficult to ensure clients from north Anglesey and Holyhead are able to attend the Magistrates' Court in its present location. It would be extremely difficult to ensure clients are able to attend in Caernarfon.
- **The Society recommends that Holyhead Magistrates' Court remain open.** Alternatively, if MoJ decides, in light of the consultation responses, to close this court, then the Society recommends that cases be moved to Llangefni, which is a good central location. The Society suggests that the former Magistrates' Court could be used instead of the Llangefni Civil and Family Court – please see our comments in relation to Llangefni below.

Llangefni Civil and Family Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. The current court at Llangefni is used by circuit judges, district judges and the tribunals service, but the Society understands that the facilities are not fit for purpose.
- However, there is a need for a court in the centre of the Anglesey. The Society understands that there is a former Magistrates' Court opposite the current facilities which is fully furnished as a court following refurbishment 18 months ago, with interview rooms and security facilities. **The Society recommends that MoJ consider moving Llangefni Civil Court and Family Court to these nearby alternative facilities in order to maintain a court in this area.**

Neath and Port Talbot Civil and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposals to close Neath and Port Talbot Civil and Family Court.
- Neath is one of the major centres of population in this area. Neath County Court has level access, disabled car parking, and appears in good repair. It is also conveniently located in the town centre so, although lacking refreshment facilities beyond a vending machine, users can easily access the same. If this court closes, users living in the Neath valley would have to travel, not only to Neath, but onwards to Swansea or Port Talbot. This would have a disproportionate impact on families involved in care and other public law proceedings, as they are more likely to be dependent upon public transport. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on vulnerable clients and those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- **The Society recommends that Neath and Port Talbot Civil and Family Court remain open.**

Pontypridd Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Pontypridd Magistrates' Court and transfer cases to Merthyr Tydfil Combined Court.
- Pontypridd Magistrates' Court is the only Magistrates' Court in Rhondda Cynon Taff county and provides a full range of criminal and magistrates' court services. Closing this court would significantly reduce access to justice in the area.
- This proposal does not give sufficient consideration to the inadequate transport infrastructure in Wales or the character of the Pontypridd area. Many court users are based outside of Pontypridd, in areas such as Treherbert. The consultation paper states that 44 per cent of court users in Magistrates' Court users would have to travel for over one hour to reach court if Pontypridd closes. Those based in such areas would have to travel to Pontypridd before proceeding with the onward journey to Merthyr Tydfil, so their journey would be even longer. Our members are concerned that the consultation paper does not take into account the realities of travelling by public transport in the area. As one solicitor explained:

“As an example, Treherbert is at the head of the Rhondda Fawr valley. Currently, travel by bus or train to Pontypridd is a single journey of about 30 minutes. As the crow flies, Treherbert is about 7 miles from Merthyr. By bus or train, it requires a change at Pontypridd, a travelling time increased to about 1.25 to 1.5 hours each way, and obviously a doubling of the cost.”⁴⁰

- Such onerous journeys could lead to victims, witnesses and claimants being reluctant, or in some cases, entirely unable to attend court. Vulnerable clients and those on low-incomes would struggle to cope with increased costs and travel times. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.
- In addition, Pontypridd Magistrates' Court was recently refurbished and the facilities are good compared with other local courts..
- **The Society recommends that Pontypridd Magistrates' Court remains open.**

Prestatyn Magistrates' Court

- The Society disagrees with the proposal to close Prestatyn Magistrates' Court.
- Prestatyn Magistrates' Court is the only Magistrates' Court in Denbighshire county. It provides a full range of criminal and magistrates' court services. It also provides family court and tribunal services. Access to justice in Denbighshire has already been greatly reduced following the closures of Denbigh Magistrates' Court and Rhyl County Court under the CERP programme. The closure of the court in Rhyl was dependent on the work of that court being transferred to Prestatyn. If the latter is closed as well, this would further reduce access to justice in the county.
- Access to justice would also be reduced due to the nature of the journey to the alternative court in Llandudno. The consultation paper states that 63 per cent of those travelling by public transport would have to travel for over one hour to reach

⁴⁰ Survey respondent.

Llandudno. The cost of the journey may not appear to be expensive, but many people in the county live in areas of social deprivation and do not own cars. Prestatyn Magistrates' Court serves the Rhyl area following the closure of the Rhyl County Court in 2014. Rhyl West 2 in Denbighshire is the second most deprived area in Wales according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, and Rhyl West 3 is the 11th most deprived area.⁴¹ Court users that are able to travel by car would have to use the A55, which is often congested. Longer journeys would have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable court users and make the stress of going to court even worse. The Society reiterates its concerns about the impact of longer, more expensive journey times on court users, particularly those on low incomes, that are set out in our main consultation response.

- **The Society recommends that this court remains open.**

Wrexham Tribunal and Hearing Centre (Rhyd Broughton)

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

⁴¹ Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (revised) 2014, page 15:<http://gov.wales/docs/statistics/2015/150812-wimd-2014-revised-en.pdf>,

MERGERS AND INTEGRATIONS

Midlands

Chesterfield County Court to be integrated within Chesterfield Magistrates' Court (Chesterfield Justice Centre)

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Chesterfield Tribunal (St Mary's Court) to be integrated within Chesterfield Magistrates' Court (Chesterfield Justice Centre)

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Hereford County Court and Family Court to be integrated within Hereford Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Telford County Court and Family Court to be integrated within Telford Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

North East

Doncaster County Court to be integrated within Doncaster Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal and understands that this integration is already underway.

Doncaster Tribunal (Portland Place) to be integrated within Doncaster Crown Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal and understands that this integration is already underway.

Durham Elvet House Tribunal to be integrated within other tribunal sites within the County Durham estate, including Durham County and Family Court

- The Society disagrees with this proposal. MoJ proposes to close Durham Elvet House Tribunal and move the work to other sites within the "County Durham estate." This includes places such as Peterlee and Newton Aycliffe, which are both at the extremities of County Durham. Public transport to these towns is poor. A train journey from Durham to Newton Aycliffe takes approximately 50 minutes, involves one change and costs £7.20 for a single ticket.⁴² There is no available train from Durham to Peterlee; court users would need to take a bus, involving a journey of almost one hour. However, there are excellent transport links to and within Durham. Moving this tribunal outside of Durham would reduce access to justice for local people,

⁴² National Rail Enquiries.

particularly those attending social entitlement hearings. **The Society therefore recommends that Durham Elvet House Tribunal either remains open, or is integrated into a location within central Durham.**

East Parade Sheffield Tribunal to be integrated within Sheffield Combined Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Harrogate County Court to be integrated within Harrogate Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. We understand that this merger is already underway and due to complete by the end of 2015.

Middlesbrough Tribunal Hearing Centre to be integrated within Teesside Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Quayside House Newcastle Tribunal to be integrated within North Shields (Kings Court) Tribunal

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. We understand that this merger is already underway and due to complete by September 2015.

Wilberforce Court (Hull Employment Tribunal Centre) to be integrated within Hull Magistrates' Court and Hull Combined Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

North West

Bolton Magistrates' Court to be integrated within Bolton Combined Court

- MoJ proposes to integrate Bolton Magistrates' Court within Bolton Combined Court. The consultation paper states that this integration is dependant on the closure of Bolton County Court and Family Court, which is utilised for approximately 49 per cent of its capacity. The Society suggests that it would be more sensible to keep Bolton County Court and Family Court open *and* integrate the Magistrates' Court so that the building can operate at greater capacity. This would ensure access to local justice for individuals in the area. **The Society therefore recommends that Bolton County Court and Family Court remains open and that Bolton Magistrates' Court is integrated into it.**

Lancaster County Court to be integrated within Lancaster Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Warrington Magistrates' Court to be integrated within Warrington Combined Court

- **The Society would recommend that Warrington County Court remains open and that work from Warrington Magistrates' Court is transferred there.** This would have the advantage of keeping all court work in Warrington in one location, making efficient use of the court estate.

South East

Aylesbury Crown Court to be integrated within Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Hearing Centre building

- As stated above, the Society disagrees with the proposal to close Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court, which would be necessary in order to enable the Crown Court to be relocated. **The Society recommends that MoJ consider keeping Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Hearing Centre open *and* integrating Aylesbury Crown Court into it..**

Bury St Edmunds Employment Tribunal (Government Buildings) to be integrated within Bury St Edmunds County Court

- The Society understands that this integration was recently completed and has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Cambridge Social Security and Child Support Tribunal (Eastbrook House) – Cambridge Tribunal to be integrated within Cambridge Civil Justice centre and Cambridge Magistrates' Court

- The Society understands that this integration was recently completed and has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Cambridge Residential Property Tribunal Service to be integrated within Cambridge Civil Justice Centre

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Norwich Employment Tribunal (Eliot House) integrated within Norwich Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal and understands that this integration was completed in March 2015.

Southend County Court and Family Court to be integrated within Southend Crown and Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

South West

Aldershot and Farnham County Court to be integrated within Aldershot Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Arcade Chambers (Aldershot Tribunal) to be integrated within Aldershot Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Plymouth St Catherine's House (Plymouth Tribunal) to be integrated within Plymouth Combined and Plymouth Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Southampton Western Range and Barrack Block to be integrated within Southampton Magistrates' Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Taunton Blackdown House (Taunton Tribunal) to be integrated within Taunton Deane Magistrates' Court

The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

The Crescent Centre (Bristol Tribunal) to be integrated within Bristol Civil Justice Centre

- The Society understands that this integration is already underway and has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Weymouth and Dorchester Combined Court offices to be integrated within Weymouth Magistrates Court

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Yeovil County Court to be integrated within South Somerset and Mendip Magistrates Court (Yeovil)

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.

Wales

Caernarfon Civil and Family Court to be integrated within Caernarfon Criminal Justice Centre

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal. However, the impact and practicalities of moving all of these courts into the one building must be considered. The Society understands that there is currently limited parking at the building – this would need to be extended in order to cope with the extra court users that may need to park there if the courts are integrated.

Swansea Crown Court (Guildhall) to be integrated within Swansea Crown Court (St Helens)

- The Society has not been advised of any significant concerns in relation to this proposal.