



HM Courts & Tribunals Service

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16 July 2015

HM COURTS & TRIBUNALS SERVICE ESTATES REFORM

On 23 June the Secretary of State announced his intention to work with the judiciary to reform the courts and tribunals in England and Wales. Working together, we have an opportunity to build on the strength and independence of our justice system to create a modern, efficient service. This will involve some challenging decisions about the current system. One such decision relates to the courts and tribunals estate.

I would like to notify you that, today, Courts Minister Shailesh Vara has started a consultation on the provision of courts and tribunal services in England and Wales.

As we continue the programme to reform the courts and tribunal service to create a one nation justice system, it is vital that we have the right infrastructure in place. Progress towards a modernised service is being made. Wi-Fi and digital screens have been introduced into many court buildings and a digital case management system for the administration of criminal cases is well underway.

HM Courts & Tribunals Service operates from 460 courts and tribunals across England and Wales. The estate costs taxpayers around half a billion pounds each year and, at present, it is underused. Last year, over one third of courts and tribunals were empty for more than 50% of their available hearing time. Much of the estate is ageing and requires extensive maintenance. The cost of keeping the buildings in a fit state is unsustainable.

This government's intention is to make justice more accessible in today's digital age. As part of the reform of the courts and tribunals in England and Wales we are investing significantly in digital technology to enable more issues to be resolved without people always needing to go to a court building to get justice. We are also taking forward Lord Justice Leveson's recommendations, which will ensure that we use our Crown Courts far more effectively. All of this will mean that, over time, we will become far less dependent on having a large and extensive estate to support justice. But even before we make these changes we already have a physical court estate which is underutilised and, in some cases, unsuitable for modern justice.

This consultation puts forward proposals that aim to reduce surplus capacity by closing those courts and tribunals that are unused or underused, or that are simply unsuitable for the services we need to provide from them.

Far from distancing people from justice, this consultation is about creating a system that brings it closer, and makes it fairer and faster for all. In a modern, digitally enabled society, we must not insist on so many people coming to a court in person.

To ensure that access to justice is maintained, even in more rural locations, we are committed to providing alternative ways for users to access our services. That can mean using civic and other public buildings, such as town halls, for hearings instead of underused, poorly-maintained permanent courts.

The majesty of our courts should be reserved for the most serious cases, and they must be equipped to deal with those cases effectively. At the moment, many of our buildings are simply not up to the job.

I would encourage you to respond formally to the consultation. Your knowledge and experience will help us make sure that courts and tribunals are in the right locations, that people have access to them within a reasonable travelling distance, and that cases are heard in buildings with suitable facilities.

We are particularly keen to hear people's views on the different ways they would like to interact with their courts and tribunals. It is important we understand the demand for these alternatives as we plan provision for the future.

All views will be taken into account before we make any decisions about the future of the courts and tribunal included in the consultation.

The national and regional consultation documents contain the full list of courts and tribunals we are consulting on. These are published on the [Ministry of Justice website](#).

Yours sincerely



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