

Proposals to Close 103 Magistrates' Courts and 54 County Courts in England and Wales

Under 16 separate consultation papers, closing on 15th September, The Ministry of Justice is planning to close 103 magistrates' courts in England and Wales.

Justice Secretary Ken Clarke said the government would also consult on axing 54 County Courts.

Some 300 magistrates' courts deal with minor crimes, crown court committal hearings and licensing applications.

The Magistrates' Association says it is unsurprised by plans to close underused courts but warned ministers against eroding local justice.

Mr Clarke also announced there will be a review in the autumn of the £2bn legal aid bill, saying that more had to be done to cut costs. Closing the courts will save the government at least £15m a year in running costs, plus an extra £22m in maintaining the buildings. The courts earmarked for closure make up 30% of the 540 in England and Wales.

In a written ministerial statement to MPs, Mr Clarke said: "I will ensure that we keep courts in the most strategically important locations, communities continue to have access to courts within a reasonable travelling distance, that cases are heard in courts with suitable facilities and that there is an overall reduction in cost."

Mr Clarke said that the number and location of all courts no longer reflected how populations had changed and how easy or difficult it was for people to reach them.

The government has been seeking to cut the costs of magistrates' courts for some time. Over the past decade an increasing proportion of minor offences have been dealt with out of court, such as through fixed penalty notice fines. Some courts only sit for half a day at a time, but require staff for longer hours. The courts also have indirect costs related to transporting lawyers, police officers and defendants to and from the buildings.

"When public finances are under pressure, it is vital to eliminate waste and reduce costs," said Mr Clarke. "At the same time we should also take the opportunity to think afresh about how we can provide more modern court services. We increasingly use the internet and e-mail to communicate and access services and we travel further to work, for leisure and to do our weekly shop. Providing access to justice does not necessarily mean providing a courthouse in every town or city."

John Thornhill, chairman of the Magistrates' Association, said the service had experienced three years of cuts, meaning victims were waiting longer to see justice done. He said: "The magistracy still has a very significant contribution to make. The Association has already proposed innovative and cost effective procedures for delivering community justice.

There are almost 29,000 magistrates in England and Wales, volunteers drawn from the local community and they deal with nine out of 10 cases that come before the courts.

Most cases are heard by three magistrates who only receive expenses and allowances to cover loss of earnings. District judges also appear at magistrates' courts to deal with more complex cases that do not need to be sent to full trial at Crown Court.

County Courts deal with civil matters, such as small claims and housing or minor business disputes.

A link to the relevant 16 consultation documents is:

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/consultations/consultations.htm>

PROPOSED CLOSURE OF COURTS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

REGION	MAGISTRATES' COURTS	COUNTY COURTS
North	Northwich, Southport, Knowsley,	Northwich, Southport, Penrith, Runcorn,
West	Whitehaven, Penrith, Rawtenstall, Salford, Rochdale.	Whitehaven, Rawtenstall, Chorley, Salford, Bury.

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North East	Guisborough, Bishop Auckland, Tynedale, Alnwick, Blaydon, Gosforth, Houghton Le Spring, Goole, Skipton, Selby, Batley And Dewsbury, Keighley Sitting At The Bingley Court House, Pontefract.	Bishop Auckland, Consett, Barnsley, Goole, Skipton, Pontefract, Keighley, Dewsbury.
Wales	Barry, Aberdare, Llwynypia, Ammanford, Cardigan, Llandovery, Denbigh, Pwllheli, Flint, Chepstow, Abertillery, Abergavenny, Llangejni.	Chepstow, Aberdare, Rhyl, Pontypool, Llangejni.
Midlands	Halesowen, Sutton Coldfield, West Bromwich, Rugby, Stoke, Tamworth, Ludlow, Market Drayton, Oswestry, Ilkeston, Newark, Worksop, Retford, Coalville, Market Harborough, Melton Mowbray, Spalding, Towcester, Daventry, Rutland, Kettering.	Rugby, Stourbridge, Stratford-Upon-Avon, Newark, Worksop, Melton Mowbray, Wellingborough, Grantham, Skegness, Tamworth, Oswestry, Ludlow, Shrewsbury, Evesham, Redditch, Burton-Upon-Trent, Kidderminster.
South West	Frome, Bridgwater, Liskeard, Newton Abbot, Camborne, Totnes, Honiton, Penzance, Blandford Forum, Wimborne, Coleford, Cirencester, Stroud, Andover, Alton, Lyndhurst.	Cheltenham, Penzance, Poole.
South East	Grays, Harlow, Epping, Ely, Wisbech, Thetford, Cromer, Swaffham, Sudbury, Ashford, Sittingbourne, Epsom, Woking, Mid-Sussex, Lewes, Bicester, Hemel Hempstead, Witney, Amersham, Newbury, Didcot.	Ashford, Gravesend, Haywards Heath, Epsom, Huntingdon, Harlow, Lowestoft, Newbury, Hitchin.
London	Acton, Haringey (Highgate), Harrow, Sutton, Barking, Brentford, Kingston, Woolwich, Balham Youth Court, Waltham Forest, Tower Bridge.	Ilford, Mayor's And City Court.