

Press release: Calls for views on transforming court estate

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

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

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

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

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

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

Justice Minister Lucy Frazer said:

This government is investing over £1 billion to reform and

modernise the justice system – making it more convenient, easier to use, and providing better value for the taxpayer.

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

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

Consultations

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

[Cambridge Magistrates' Court](#)

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

[Northallerton Magistrates' Court](#)

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

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

[News story: World-first register to crack down on criminals laundering dirty money through UK property market](#)

to go live by early 2021

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

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

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

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

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

Business Secretary Greg Clark said:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Courts and tribunals estate

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

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

Consultation on future estates strategy

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

Consultations on court closure proposals

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

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

The courts are:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Speaking ahead of his visit Minister Field said;

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

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

On the Afghanistan meeting the Minister said;

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

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

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

Further information

News story: National Infrastructure Commission welcomes Sir John Armitt as new Chair

Sir John Armitt has today (18 January 2018) been appointed the permanent Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC), where he will provide strategic advice to ensure the UK has the long-term infrastructure it needs to thrive.

Having served as a Commissioner since the NIC was established in 2015 and last year being appointed Deputy Chair, Sir John Armitt is a familiar face to the Commission.

With a background in engineering, Sir John Armitt's expertise in infrastructure and major project delivery is extensive.

He has a proven track record of working at the forefront of UK infrastructure in positions that included the Chief Executive of Network Rail, President of the Institution of Civil Engineers and Chairman of the Olympic Delivery Authority, where he played a key role in coordinating the 2012 London Olympics.

He was awarded a CBE in 1996 for his contribution to the rail industry and a knighthood in 2012 for his work in engineering and construction.

Announcing the appointment, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, said:

Boosting productivity is essential to sustaining real wage growth. And investing in infrastructure is one of the keys to raising our productivity performance.

The National Infrastructure Commission's expertise is vital for ensuring the UK's infrastructure is fit for the future. Sir John Armitt brings years of experience of UK infrastructure. With him at the helm, I am confident we will develop a strategic and ambitious infrastructure plan that supports economic growth for decades to come.

Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission Sir John Armitt said:

I'm delighted to have been appointed as the Chair of the National Infrastructure Commission as we prepare for the publication of our first National Infrastructure Assessment later this year.

Making the right choices about planning and investing in infrastructure is critical to the UK's prosperity and quality of life. I want the Commission to remain focused on tackling the long-term issues of congestion, capacity and carbon – and to continue to hold the government to account where decisive action is needed – so we can secure the improvements that companies, communities and families need.

I look forward to working with my fellow Commissioners and listening to our stakeholders as we set out the way forward for the UK's infrastructure.

Replacing Lord Adonis who resigned from the position at the end of last year, Sir John Armitt takes charge of the NIC's exciting programme of work, with the first ever National Infrastructure Assessment due out this summer. The assessment will take a long-term view of Britain's infrastructure needs and make recommendations to the government on how best to meet them.

Further information

First set up in 2015 and established permanently in January 2017, the [NIC](#) is an executive agency which helps plan, prioritise and ensure efficient investment in Britain's infrastructure. It provides government with strategic thinking to address the UK's long term infrastructure needs.