



PRESS RELEASE

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Is local justice under threat?

The government today published a Written Ministerial Statement announcing consultation on the closure of 103 magistrates' courts and 54 County Courts - 16 of which are co-located.

The Magistrates' Association (MA) views these proposals with caution as it believes they could threaten one of the fundamental principles of our justice system - local justice delivered by ordinary citizens in the communities where offences are committed. The MA does recognise that the justice system must contribute to the huge reduction in government spending that has to be implemented. The MA accepts that courthouses which are unfit for purpose or are infrequently used should not continue to be an unnecessary drain on limited resources. The MA also believes that this is a good opportunity for a full and open debate on the provision of local justice.

Over the last three years magistrates' courts have seen cuts in budgets of 7.5% each year, resulting in fewer courts due to staff shortages. Victims are now often waiting longer to see justice done. These proposals could mean that many court users including victims, witnesses and defendants may have long journeys to court - a disincentive to attend, resulting in further delays and extra expense.

John Thornhill, chairman of the MA said, "The MA believes that the magistracy still has a very significant contribution to make as supported by the Minister, Jonathan Djanogly, who said in his statement that the magistracy's voluntary contribution as the bedrock of our justice system will continue to be supported by the government. The Association has already proposed innovative and cost effective procedures for delivering community justice. We look forward to discussing such proposals with the government to develop a cohesive justice system in which crucial decisions on dealing with those who offend against fellow citizens are dealt in a consistent manner by the dedicated 29,000 magistrates properly trained for this vital role."

Notes for Editors

2011 will be the 650 anniversary of the institution of the office of Justice of the Peace (JP) and a senior judge recently stated that *its members have served the justice system with distinction ever since*. Currently nearly 29,000 men and women - known as JPs or magistrates - deal with 95% of all criminal cases brought before courts and a significant number of civil matters including family work. Magistrates are not paid for attending court, receiving only modest expenses, subsistence and small recompense for any loss of earnings. They have to attend training, are mentored and regularly appraised and work within guidelines.

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PATRON: Her Majesty the Queen
PRESIDENT: The Lord Chief Justice

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DEPUTY CHAIRMEN: John Fassenfelt JP, John Howson JP
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