



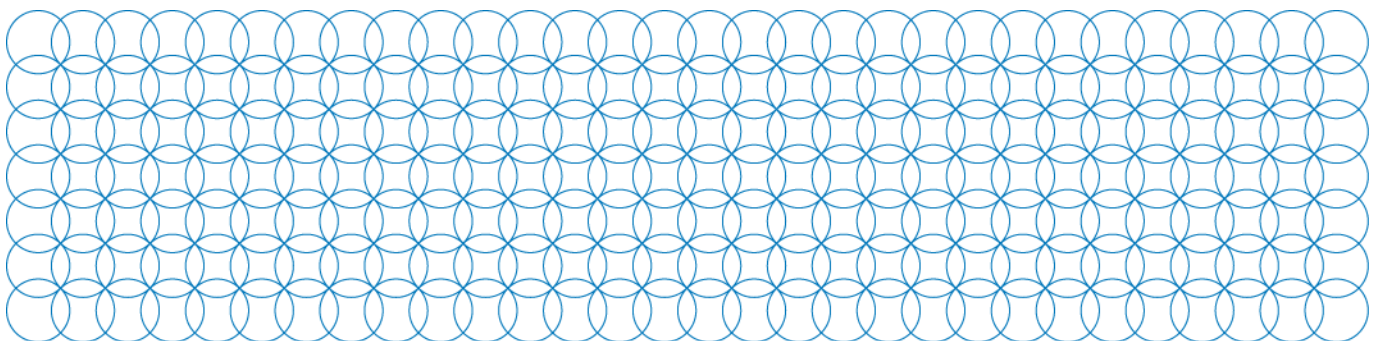
Ministry of  
**JUSTICE**

# **Proposal on the provision of courts services in HMCS Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley**

**Consultation Paper CP01/10**

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Ministry of  
**JUSTICE**

## **Proposal on the provision of courts services in HMCS Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley (BHTV)**

**A consultation produced by Her Majesty's Courts Service, part of the  
Ministry of Justice. It is also available on the Ministry of Justice website at  
[www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk)**

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**Proposal on the provision of courts services in HMCS Bedfordshire,  
Hertfordshire and Thames Valley**

## The HMCS national estates strategy

HMCS is committed to providing a high quality courts service within a reasonable travelling distance of the communities that use it, while ensuring value for money for taxpayers.

HMCS currently operates out of 530 courthouses – 330 magistrates' courts, 219 county courts and 91 Crown Court centres.<sup>1</sup> However, the number and location of these does not reflect changes in population, workload or transport and communication links over the years since many of them were opened. This has resulted in some courts sitting infrequently and hearing too few cases. Some buildings do not provide suitable facilities for those attending or are not fully accessible for disabled court users. A number of magistrates' courts do not have secure facilities for prisoners. Other agencies with whom we work across the justice system are also put under strain by the need to work at a number of different courts in the same area, some of which are in close proximity to each other.

When public finances are under pressure, it is vital we eliminate waste and reduce costs. This consultation sets out how we believe we can best meet the justice needs of communities in each area and invites comments on whether work from the courts we propose to close could be moved to nearby courts which have sufficient capacity and, in the majority of cases, better facilities. By using these courts more efficiently we hope to save public money while also improving the services we provide for court users.

We are also consulting on the merger of a number of Local Justice Areas which would enable effective changes to courthouse provision. This will facilitate further efficiency savings in administrative work, whilst ensuring that magistrates continue to provide a vital frontline service to the public.

In order to form the proposals in this document the following principles have been followed:

- improve utilisation to at least 80%;
- provide greater flexibility through co-location of criminal courts and civil courts with tribunal hearing centres;
- plan on a long term basis;
- integrate developing policy and operational changes into estates planning;
- ensure access to courts – enabling the majority of the public to be within a 60 minute commute of their nearest court by public transport;<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A number of courts are co-located or in combined centres.

<sup>2</sup> With consideration given to those who live in rural communities.

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- ensure the estate supports the challenges of rural access;
- wherever possible centralise back office functions;
- have specialist facilities in large strategic locations only;
- move towards larger courts;
- maintain properties at an appropriate level; and
- share facilities with the Tribunal Service.

Court users should not have to make excessively long or difficult journeys to attend court, but geographical proximity for all court users should not be the sole (or even primary) concern. Providing people with appropriate access to justice does not necessarily mean providing a courthouse in every town or city. The speed of case outcome, the quality and efficiency of the service we provide, and an environment which commands respect for the justice system and the safety and comfort of court users, are much more significant to the delivery of effective local justice across all communities in England and Wales.

We need to ensure that local communities, including those in rural areas, have access to a court and we seek views on this. At the same time we must be realistic about the frequency with which most people need to visit a court, compared to other services which they use and travel to more regularly such as banks, schools, supermarkets or hospitals.

We need to consider the required courts estate in the context of the falling workload which is being dealt with in a more efficient and timely way as a result of close partnership working between HMCS and the judiciary. At the same time, we have been careful to ensure that there remains sufficient capacity within the remaining courts to accommodate any future increases in workload.

This consultation will take account of all of these factors plus any additional relevant considerations which are put forward during the consultation period.



## Introduction

This paper announces proposals that would enable HMCS in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley (BHTV) to provide vital public services whilst reducing the cost for the taxpayer.

Feedback to the questions set out in the consultations will enable us to ensure that courts remain in the most important strategic locations, that communities continue to have access to courts within a reasonable travelling distance, and that cases are heard in courts with suitable facilities which will in turn reduce the overall costs. At the same time, we have been careful to ensure that there would be sufficient capacity within the remaining magistrates' courts should there be a decision to increase their sentencing powers in the future.

The consultation seeks the views of everyone with an interest in local justice arrangements. The Lord Chancellor will take all views expressed into account before making any decision on which courts ought to be closed and when.

This consultation is being conducted in line with the Code of Practice on Consultation issued by the Cabinet Office and falls within the scope of the Code. The consultation criteria, which are set out on page 43 have been followed.

A preliminary Impact Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment initial screening have been completed, which will be developed during the consultation period. A copy of the initial Impact Assessment, the initial screening for an Equality Impact Assessment and the Rural Proofing checklist is available at [www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk).

Copies of the consultation paper are being sent to:

- Local MPs;
- Local Constabulary;
- Crown Prosecution Service – Chief Crown Prosecutor;
- Director of Offender Management;
- Civil Court Users Association;
- District and County Councils and Local Authorities;
- Local Courts Board;
- Local Criminal Justice Boards;
- Judicial Issues Group;
- Local Bench Chairs;
- Criminal Defence Service;

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- Law Society;
- Bar Council;
- Local legal practitioners;
- Senior Presiding Judge;
- Presiding Judge;
- Senior District Judge
- Association of HM District Judges;
- District Judge (Magistrates' Court);
- The Chief Magistrate;
- Magistrates' Association;
- National Bench Chairs Forum;
- Justices' Clerks' Society;
- Lord Lieutenant;
- High Sheriff;
- Witness Care;
- Victim Support;
- Youth Offending Teams;
- Prison Escort and Custody Service;
- The Coroners Service; and
- Trades Unions (PCS, FDA and Prospect).

This list is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive and responses are welcomed from anyone with an interest in or views on the subject covered by this paper.

This consultation is also available at [www.justice.gov.uk](http://www.justice.gov.uk)

A map of proposals set out in this consultation paper is available at Annex A.

## **Magistrates' courts in Bedfordshire**

There are no proposed changes to the provision of magistrates' courts in Bedfordshire.

## Magistrates' courts in Hertfordshire

### The need for change

In Hertfordshire, HMCS currently operates magistrates' courts in St Albans (Central Hertfordshire LJA), Hertford (East Hertfordshire LJA), Stevenage (North Hertfordshire LJA), Hemel Hempstead and Watford (West Hertfordshire LJA) and Hatfield (overnight remand court for the County).

Following a consultation in October 2009, it has already been announced that Cheshunt (East Hertfordshire LJA) will close at the earliest opportunity.

The location of these remaining six courts does not reflect changes in population, workload or transport and communication links since they were originally opened. The overall reduction in workload in magistrates' courts has led to a utilisation rate in 2009-10 of 70% across Hertfordshire.<sup>3</sup> Without reducing the number of magistrates' courts we operate out of in Hertfordshire, HMCS is unable to provide an efficient service.

By implementing the proposals set out below we believe that HMCS can make better use of the remaining estate and significantly reduce costs both to HMCS and other agencies across the criminal justice system.

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<sup>3</sup> Courtroom utilisation is the time a courtroom is used, against the hours that a courtroom is available for use.

## The proposal

- To continue operating magistrates' courts in St Albans, Hertford, Stevenage, Watford and Hatfield;
- To close the magistrates' court in Hemel Hempstead;
- To merge the Local Justice Areas of West Hertfordshire with Central Hertfordshire to be called 'West and Central Hertfordshire'; and
- To merge the Local Justice Areas of North Hertfordshire with East Hertfordshire to be called 'North and East Hertfordshire'.

## **Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court**

Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court is under-utilised because there is insufficient workload for the number of courts in the area, and because the type of cases it can hear is limited due to inappropriate facilities.

The building was built in 1969 and consists of four courtrooms. Overall the building conditions and facilities are deemed poor; the cell accommodation is inadequate, there are no separate waiting areas for the prosecution and defence witnesses, and the docking area for prison escort vans is insecure.

The proposal is to close Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court and share its current workload between Watford, St Albans and potentially Luton Magistrates' Court. Custody cases would be held at either St Albans or Luton as appropriate.

### **Workload**

The court currently sits every day in at least two out of four courtrooms. There are currently sufficient unused court rooms at Watford and St Albans, and if needs be Luton, to easily absorb the work currently being undertaken at Hemel Hempstead.

### **Accommodation**

Three of the court rooms at Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court are on the first floor and are not Discrimination Disability Act (DDA) compliant. The fourth is an informal court room on the ground floor. Two of the first floor court rooms are of a reasonable size and have secure docks, while the third is small, which makes it difficult to use. The first floor waiting area is cramped.

The court house contains the custody facilities for the West Hertfordshire Local Justice Area (LJA). In addition, Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court has prison video links and witness video links.

All the proposed receiving courts have suitable facilities, with the exception of Watford Magistrates' Court which does not have any cells for custody cases. As Watford is the other magistrates' court within the West Hertfordshire LJA, all potential custody work would need to be done outside the current LJA were the court to close.

St Albans has six magistrates' courts, three of which have custody facilities and three have video link facilities. The waiting areas, interview facilities and custody facilities are the best in the country. It is DDA compliant on the main floor, with accessible custody provision.

## **Location**

The transport links between Hemel Hempstead and its adjoining towns are generally good. The town sits at the axis of the M1 and the A41, and there are good road links to Luton, Watford and St Albans.

Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court is located fourteen miles from Luton (approximately 24 minutes drive), eight miles from St Albans (around seventeen minutes drive) and nine miles from Watford (around 25 minutes drive).

There is a main line rail link between Hemel Hempstead and Watford (approximately 10 minutes at a cost of £4.30 for an off peak return), and a shuttle link between Watford and St Albans. St Albans also has a main line link to Luton (approximately fifteen minutes at a cost of £5.00 for an off peak return).

There are also regular buses between from Hemel Hempstead which take on average one hour to Luton, 30 minutes to St Albans and 40 minutes to Watford costing approximately £4.00 return.

## **Staff implications**

No HMCS staff are permanently based at Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court. Staff and Legal Advisers are based at Watford Magistrates' Court, and currently travel to Hemel Hempstead for hearings.

HMCS is will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

## **Cost implications**

The 2009/10 operating cost<sup>4</sup> of Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court was £184,396. The closure of the court house would also remove the need for HMCS investment in backlog maintenance of around £205,000.

## **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>4</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).

## **Local Justice Area merger of West and Central Hertfordshire LJAs to form the Central & West Hertfordshire LJA and North and East Hertfordshire LJAs to form the North & East Hertfordshire LJA**

There are currently four Local Justice Areas within the Hertfordshire LCJB area, each with a separate bench of magistrates. If we were to create two benches – “Central & West Hertfordshire” and “North & East Hertfordshire” – we would be able to more flexibly deploy these magistrates to share their vital expertise and experience with a wider community. In addition, this would allow custody cases to continue to be heard within the LJA at St Albans.

The merger of these benches would reduce the amount of administrative work involved in organising and attending separate bench and committee meetings. This would facilitate further efficiency savings whilst enabling an effective service to continue to be provided.

A merger of the West and Central Hertfordshire benches would create a combined Central and West bench of 295 magistrates sitting primarily at Watford and St Albans Magistrates’ Courts. A merger of North and East Hertfordshire benches would create a combined bench of 190 magistrates. The North and East Hertfordshire benches already work closely together and share dedicated court lists for Specialist Domestic Violence Courts and video links. The family panels for North and East Hertfordshire combined some years ago.



## Magistrates' courts in Thames Valley

### The need for change

HMCS currently operates fourteen magistrates' courts in nine Local Justice Areas (LJA) within the Thames Valley Local Criminal Justice Board (LCJB) area.

Following a consultation in October 2009, it has already been announced that Wantage (Southern Oxfordshire LJA) will close at the earliest opportunity.

The location of the remaining courts does not reflect changes in population, workload or transport and communication links since they were originally opened. The overall reduction in workload in magistrates' courts has led to a utilisation rate in Thames Valley in 2009-10 of 70%.<sup>5</sup> Without reducing the number of magistrates' courts we operate out of in the Thames Valley, HMCS is unable to provide an efficient service.

By implementing the proposals set out below we believe that HMCS can make better use of the remaining estate and significantly reduce costs both to HMCS and other agencies across the criminal justice system.

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<sup>5</sup> Courtroom utilisation is the time a courtroom is used, against the hours that a courtroom is available for use.

## The proposal

To continue to operate magistrates' courts in:

- Central Berkshire (Reading);
- Central Buckinghamshire (Aylesbury – co-located with the County Court);
- East Berkshire (Bracknell, Maidenhead and Slough);
- Milton Keynes (Milton Keynes);
- North Oxfordshire (Banbury);
- Oxford (Oxford); and
- Wycombe & Beaconsfield (High Wycombe – co-located with the County Court).

To close the magistrates' courts in:

- Central Buckinghamshire (Amersham);
- Northern Oxfordshire (Bicester and Witney);
- Southern Oxfordshire (Didcot); and
- West Berkshire (Newbury – co-located with the County Court).

To merge the following Local Justice Areas:

- Berkshire:
  - (a) Merge West Berkshire Bench with Central Berkshire Bench to create a combined 'Central and West Berkshire LJA' of 177 magistrates, sitting primarily at Reading Magistrates' Court;
  - or**
  - (b) Merge all three Berkshire benches to create a single LJA with 347 magistrates sitting throughout the remaining four courthouses in the county.
- Oxfordshire:
  - (a) Merge the Southern Oxfordshire Bench with the Oxford Bench to create a combined 'Oxford and Southern Oxfordshire LJA' of 182 magistrates, sitting primarily at Oxford Magistrates' Court;
  - or**
  - (b) Merge all three Oxfordshire benches to create a single Oxfordshire LJA with 292 magistrates sitting throughout the remaining four courthouses in the county.

- Buckinghamshire:
  - (a) Merge Central Buckinghamshire and Wycombe & Beaconsfield benches to create a combined 'Central and South Buckinghamshire' LJA of 206 magistrates, sitting primarily at Aylesbury and High Wycombe;
  - or**
  - (b) Merge all three Buckinghamshire benches to create a single Buckinghamshire LJA with 354 magistrates' sitting throughout the three courthouses in the county.

## **Newbury Magistrates' Court**

Newbury Magistrates' Court was built in 1966 and consists of two magistrates' court rooms, and an informal court room shared with the co-located county court (please see the following section on county courts for further details).

The proposal is to close and dispose of Newbury Magistrates' Court and share its current workload between the other court houses within Berkshire and other courts as needed.

### **Workload**

The court sits every day except Friday, hearing Domestic Violence (DV) cases on Thursday, although this does not require exclusive use of the court.

### **Accommodation**

Although the overall building conditions and facilities are reasonable, the courthouse is not DDA compliant. The two court rooms on the first floor are of reasonable size but are without disabled access. The largest of the first floor court rooms has a secure dock.

The third courtroom is an informal room on the ground floor of a difficult size, which is currently being used to hear county court cases. The co-located county court facilities also include a counter, and staff office.

The courthouse does contain the custody facilities for West Berkshire Local Justice Area (LJA) and these facilities were recently improved in a joint project with Thames Valley Police, which owns the adjacent police station.

There are no prison video links and but witness video links were installed recently in one court room. In addition, the court house has two multi-use interview rooms though there are no separate waiting areas for prosecution and defence witnesses

### **Location**

The transport links between Newbury and its adjoining towns are generally reasonable, as it sits at the axis of the M4 and the A34. However, it is at the western end of Berkshire and all the other courts within the county are to the east. There are good road links to the other court centres in Berkshire via the M4 or A4. From Newbury, Didcot and Reading are both around 20 miles away (30 minutes drive); Bracknell is 31 miles away (around 38 minutes drive); Maidenhead is 35 miles away (43 minutes drive); and Slough is nearly 40 miles away (around 48 minutes drive).

There is a main line rail link and bus service between Newbury and Reading, Maidenhead and Slough, and a commuter line between Reading and Bracknell. Reading is 32 minutes by train and 50 minutes by bus from Newbury (£5.00 off peak return and £6.40 return respectively).

### **Staff implications**

The only HMCS staff permanently employed at Newbury Magistrates' Court work within the county court. Staff at Reading Magistrates' Court currently travel to Newbury for hearings .

HMCS will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

### **Cost implications**

Newbury County Court shares accommodation with the magistrates' court. The 2009/10 operating cost of Newbury Magistrates' and County Court was £132,203.<sup>6</sup>

### **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Newbury Magistrates' Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>6</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).

## **Amersham Magistrates' Court**

Amersham Magistrates' Court was built in 1968 and consists of two reasonably sized ground floor magistrates' court rooms, one of which has a secure dock. The magistrates' court does not have custody facilities.

Due to the reducing volumes of magistrates' workload in Buckinghamshire, Amersham Magistrates' Court is no longer needed.

### **Accommodation**

Amersham Magistrates' Court is not compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act. It does not have video link facilities, a victim and witness suite, or separate waiting areas for prosecution and defence witnesses. However, it does have one multi-use interview room, and one courtroom has a hearing loop.

### **Workload**

The court has not been used for magistrates' court work since March 2010, though the court did not receive many cases before this. This has not had a negative impact on the delivery of justice in the area.

### **Location**

The transport links between Amersham and its adjoining towns are generally reasonable. The town has reasonable road links with Aylesbury (around seventeen miles away and 24 minutes drive) and High Wycombe (around eight miles away and sixteen minutes drive).

There is a main line rail link between Amersham and Aylesbury, which takes 21 minutes (£8.40 off peak return). Although much closer by road, rail links between Amersham and High Wycombe involve two changes and so is the longer journey at around 80 minutes.

### **Staff implications**

No staff are permanently employed at Amersham Magistrates' Court.

HMCS will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

### **Cost implications**

The 2009/10 operating cost of Amersham Magistrates' Court was £79,587.<sup>7</sup> The closure of the court house would also remove the need for HMCS investment in backlog maintenance of around £7,000.

### **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Amersham Magistrates' Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>7</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).

## **Bicester Magistrates' Court**

Bicester Magistrates' Court was built in 1957 and consists of two ground floor courtrooms, and first floor office accommodation with some meeting and training facilities. The courthouse has custody facilities.

Bicester is a satellite court that deals with specialist traffic cases and traffic trials plus ad hoc cases, such as long running prosecutions, as needed.

The proposal is to make Bicester an administrative centre, and relocate staff from an office complex at Middleton Stoney once the lease on that property expires. The few hearings currently listed at either Bicester or Witney magistrates' courts would be shared by Banbury, throughout Buckinghamshire and possibly Bedford. Both Bicester and Witney Magistrates' Courts have low utilisation levels as a result of reducing workloads and unsuitable facilities.

### **Workload**

The court currently sits for two sessions per week (in one day). This is not a good use of resources or facilities for HMCS or other criminal justice partners.

### **Accommodation**

The court rooms and custody facilities are compliant with the DDA. There are witness video links, a victim and witness suite, and two multi-use interview rooms. All of these facilities would be retained if the building is converted to an administrative centre.

There are also office and training/ meeting room facilities. The proposed conversion of the building to an administrative centre means that these additional facilities could be retained.

### **Location**

The transport links between Bicester and its adjoining towns are generally good. The town sits at the axis of the M40, the A34 and the A41. There are good road links to Banbury (20 miles and around 26 minutes drive), Oxford (twelve miles or nineteen minutes drive), Didcot (27 miles or 36 minutes drive), Aylesbury (seventeen miles or 25 minutes drive), High Wycombe (34 miles and 39 minutes drive) and Milton Keynes (25 miles and 46 minutes drive). However, the journey to Bedford takes longer (40 miles and 70 minutes drive).

There is a main line rail link and bus service between Bicester and Banbury and High Wycombe, and a shuttle link between Bicester and Oxford.

Bicester to Aylesbury takes 1 hour 38 minutes by bus, 42 minutes by train.  
Bicester to Banbury takes 1 hour 25 minutes by bus, 21 minutes by train.  
Bicester to Bedford takes 1 hour 35 minutes by bus, 2 hours 33 minutes by train.  
Bicester to Didcot takes 1 hour 35 minutes by bus, 52 minutes by train.  
Bicester to Milton Keynes takes 58 minutes by bus, 1 hour 59 minutes by train.

Bicester to Oxford takes 40 minutes by bus, 26 minutes by train. Bicester to High Wycombe takes 2 hours 47 minutes by bus, 29 minutes by train.

### **Staff implications**

The only HMCS staff at Bicester Magistrates' Court are involved in administrative duties that do not support the courts based there. Staff currently travel from their administrative base at Oxford Magistrates' Court to manage these court rooms.

HMCS will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

### **Cost implications**

The 2009/10 operating cost of Bicester Magistrates' Court was £85,698.<sup>8</sup>

### **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Bicester Magistrates' Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>8</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).



## **Witney Magistrates' Court**

Witney Magistrates' Court was built in 1969 and consists of two reasonably sized ground floor court rooms. Both are DDA compliant. One of the courts has been adjusted for use as a training facility, primarily for magistrates. However, the court house does not contain any custody facilities or secure docks, which limits the kind of case that can be heard here.

The proposal would be to close and dispose of Witney and close Bicester as a hearing centre; both are under-used magistrates' courts. It is further proposed that the work of these two courts is shared between the remaining magistrates' courts at Banbury, throughout Buckinghamshire and possibly Bedford.

### **Workload**

Witney only sees very occasional cases when there are listing difficulties elsewhere. It opens on average for seven days per month.

### **Accommodation**

Witney Magistrates' Court has no prison video links nor witness video links, and does not have a victim and witness suite. However, there is one multi-use interview room for prosecution and defence witnesses and one court room has a hearing loop.

### **Location**

The transport links between Witney and its adjoining towns are generally poor. The town is on the A40, which is its principle link to Oxford. All travel further east needs to go via Oxford where there are links to the M40 and the A34. Witney is 35 miles from both Aylesbury and Banbury (around 50 minutes drive); 21 miles from Didcot (around 43 minutes drive); 53 miles from Milton Keynes (74 minutes drive); twelve miles from Oxford (around 22 minutes drive); and 38 miles from High Wycombe (around 51 minutes drive). Bedford is further away at 70 miles or around 100 minutes drive.

Witney is not on a railway line, but there are regular buses and coaches connecting the town with Oxford (39 minutes away), and from there with connecting towns further afield.

### **Staff implications**

No HMCS staff are employed at Witney Magistrates' Court. Staff at Banbury Magistrates' Court currently travel to Witney for hearings.

HMCS will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

### **Cost implications**

The 2009/10 operating cost of Witney Magistrates' Court was £63,536.<sup>9</sup>  
The closure of the court house would also remove the need for HMCS investment in backlog maintenance of around £45,000.

### **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Witney Magistrates' Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>9</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).

## **Didcot Magistrates' Court**

Didcot Magistrates' Court was built in 1960, and was substantially renovated before 2005. It consists of two courtrooms of reasonable size both on the ground floor. The courthouse is compliant with the DDA. The waiting area is satisfactory, the courthouse has custody facilities, and one of the courts has a secure dock.

The proposal is to close and dispose of Didcot Magistrates' Court and transfer its current workload to Oxford Magistrates' Court. In March 2010, the closure of Wantage Magistrates' Court was announced following consultation; there is capacity at Oxford to absorb the work from both courts.

### **Workload**

The court hears a full range of cases and activities. However, due to the proximity of preferable accommodation, it only hears cases in a little over half the possible sittings.

### **Accommodation**

There is a witness video link at the court and a multi use interview room for prosecution and defence witnesses. Both courtrooms have hearing loops.

### **Location**

The transport links between Didcot and its adjoining towns are generally good. The town sits besides the A34, which in turns links to the M4 and M40. It is proposed that the majority of work transfers to Oxford, which is under seventeen miles away, which takes around 26 minutes by car, 41 minutes by bus, and 20 minutes by train.

### **Staff implications**

No HMCS staff are employed at Didcot Magistrates' Court. Staff at Oxford Magistrates' Court currently travel to Didcot for hearings.

HMCS will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

### **Cost implications**

The 2009/10 operating cost of Didcot Magistrates' Court was £97,832.<sup>10</sup> The closure of the courthouse would also remove the need for HMCS investment in backlog maintenance of around £20,000.

### **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Didcot Magistrates' Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>10</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).

## **Bench Mergers in the Thames Valley Area**

The current justice area structure prevents magistrates' from being deployed flexibly or sharing their vital expertise and experience with a wider community that would benefit. We are consulting on the best way to merge the following benches for the maximum benefit. However, we believe that any of the following options would reduce the amount of administrative work involved in organising and attending separate bench and committee meetings across the whole LCJB area. This would facilitate further efficiency savings whilst enabling an effective service to continue to be provided.

## Berkshire

If the decision is taken to close Newbury Magistrates' Court, there will not be any remaining magistrates' courts in West Berkshire. It therefore makes practical sense to merge West Berkshire with another Local Justice Area (LJA) to ensure magistrates are deployed flexibly and can share their vital expertise and experience with a wider community that would benefit from it.

There are currently 47 magistrates who sit on the West Berkshire bench, which makes it increasingly impractical to fill the various statutory positions on the committees and panels that are required. Due to the volume of work it is impossible to argue for an increase in the size of the Bench. Therefore, a decision is required to create a sufficiently large pool of magistrates to undertake the work and to fulfil the necessary statutory positions.

There are two options available:

- (a) Merge the West Berkshire Bench with the Central Berkshire Bench to create a combined Central and West Local Justice Area of 177 magistrates, sitting primarily at Reading Magistrates' Court;
- or**
- (b) Merge all three Berkshire LJAs to create a single LJA with 347 magistrates sitting throughout the remaining four court houses in the county.

## Oxfordshire

If the decision is taken to close Didcot Magistrates' Court, there will not be any remaining magistrates' courts in South Oxfordshire. It therefore makes practical sense to merge South Oxfordshire with another LJA to ensure magistrates' are deployed flexibly and can share their vital expertise and experience with a wider community that would benefit from it.

There are currently 46 magistrates who sit on the Southern Oxfordshire bench, which makes it increasingly impractical to fill the various statutory positions on the committees and panels that are required. Due to the volume of work it is impossible to argue for an increase in the size of the Bench. Therefore, a decision is required to create a sufficiently large pool of magistrates to undertake the work and to fulfil the necessary statutory positions.

There are two options available:

- (a) Merge the Southern Oxfordshire bench with the Oxford bench to create a combined Oxford and Southern Oxfordshire LJA with 182 magistrates sitting primarily at Oxford Magistrates' Court;
- or**
- (b) Merge all three LJAs in Oxfordshire to create a single Oxfordshire LJA with 292 magistrates sitting throughout the remaining four court houses in the county.

## **Buckinghamshire**

If the LJA mergers for Berkshire and Oxfordshire go ahead then it raises the question whether a similar approach should be taken with the three benches within Buckinghamshire. This would enable the bench to list cases as effectively as possible, and deploy magistrates flexibly so they can share their vital expertise and experience with a wider community. On that basis, there are two options available:

- (a) Merge the Central Buckinghamshire and Wycombe and Beaconsfield benches to create a combined 'Central and South Buckinghamshire' LJA with 206 magistrates sitting primarily at Aylesbury and High Wycombe;
- or**
- (b) Merge all three LJAs in Buckinghamshire to create a single Buckinghamshire LJA with 354 magistrates sitting throughout the three court houses in the county.

## **County courts in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley (BHTV)**

### **The need for change**

HMCS civil courts are providing increasingly affordable accessible and efficient services. We have increased mediation and alternative dispute resolution services in order to reduce the amount of cases which have to come to court, and improve the experience for users. As more claims are processed online and by telephone, and other non-judicial processes are being centralised away from the frontline, counter services will also be less needed.

The geographical area of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley (BHTV) is diverse and incorporates both urban and rural communities, pockets of relative wealth and some of the highest levels of deprivation in the UK. The 2001 Census data showed that the population of BHTV is predominantly White British, with some areas of greater diversity such as Slough and Luton which have a large Asian or Asian British population.



## The proposal

HMCS BHTV currently has county courts in the following counties:

- Bedfordshire (Bedford – co-located with the magistrates' court, and Luton Family Justice Centre);
- Berkshire (Newbury – co-located with the magistrates' court, Reading Family Justice Centre, and Slough);
- Buckinghamshire (Aylesbury – co-located with the magistrates' court, High Wycombe – co-located with the magistrates' court, and Milton Keynes Family Justice Centre);
- Hertfordshire (Hertford, Hitchin, and St Albans – co-located at the Crown court, and Watford Family Justice Centre); and
- Oxfordshire (Banbury – co-located with the magistrates' court, Oxford – Combined court and Family Justice Centre).

Of these, we propose to close the county courts in:

- Newbury (co-located with the magistrates' court); and
- Hitchin.

## **Newbury County Court**

Newbury County Court is co-located within Newbury Magistrates' Court (on which we are also consulting; see above). Newbury County Court was integrated into the magistrates' building in March 2006 and the old, leasehold property, was disposed of. As mentioned earlier, Newbury County Court has access to a ground floor hearing room in the magistrates' court, there is a public counter and a team of five staff including a bailiff based there. The county court deals with civil and bankruptcy work.

The Thames Valley Probation Service occupies approximately half of the ground floor of the building at Newbury plus one office on the first floor. If the closure and disposal of Newbury went ahead then alternative accommodation would have to be found by the Thames Valley Probation Service for their staff.

If the decision is made to close and dispose of Newbury Magistrates' Court then a consequential would be the closure of the associated county court. The proposal is that the work would be transferred to Reading County Court and Family Justice Centre, which we believe could easily absorb the work.

### **Workload**

A District Judge sits at Newbury County Court every Wednesday and alternate Mondays. The closure and disposal of Newbury County Court, as described above, would lead to the work being moved to Reading County Court. Reading County Court provides a full counter service, which would be retained.

### **Accommodation**

The accommodation details for Newbury County Court are the same as the magistrates' court described above.

### **Location**

The transport links between Newbury and its adjoining towns are generally reasonable, as it sits at the axis of the M4 and the A34. However, it is at the western end of Berkshire and all the other courts within the county are to the east. There are good road links to the other court centres in Berkshire via the M4 or A4. From Newbury, Didcot and Reading are both around 20 miles away (30 minutes drive); Bracknell is 31 miles away (around 38 minutes drive); Maidenhead is 35 miles away (43 minutes drive); and Slough is nearly 40 miles away (around 48 minutes drive).

There is a main line rail link and bus service between Newbury and Reading. Reading is 25 minutes by train and 70 minutes by bus from Newbury (£.500 off peak return and £6.40 return respectively).

### **Staff implications**

There are currently five staff based at Newbury County Court.

HMCS will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

### **Cost implications**

Newbury County Court shares accommodation with the magistrates' court. The 2009/10 operating cost of Newbury Magistrates' and County Court was £132,203.<sup>11</sup>

### **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Newbury County Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>11</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).

## Hitchin County Court

Hitchin County Court is a free standing small county court based in office accommodation on the outskirts of the town. The court house has one civil hearing room and two District Judge chambers. The county court deals with civil, family and divorce work.

The proposal is to close Hitchin County Court and move the work to the nearby county court building at Luton which can easily absorb the work.

Northern and East Hertfordshire family proceeding court also sits in Hitchin County Court once a week. If the proposal to close Hitchin County Court is taken forward, these family cases will be accommodated at either Stevenage or Shire Hall Hertford Magistrates' Courts, or possibly Luton County Court.

### **Workload**

The family proceedings court sits one day a week every Tuesday. Hitchin County Court has three hearing rooms but only uses two regularly. These two courts are utilised approximately half the available time each week. The closure of Hitchin County Court would lead to the work being moved to Luton County Court, which provides a full counter service.

### **Accommodation**

Hitchin County Court sits in an office block built in 1985. Although there is a DDA compliant hearing room, there are no video link facilities, the waiting facilities are poor and there are no hearing loop facilities.

### **Location**

The transport links between Hitchin and Luton, the proposed recipient of this transferred work, are generally reasonable. However, there are no rail links.

Hitchin is ten miles from Luton (around 30 minutes drive or 50 minutes by regular bus service); and six miles from Stevenage (thirteen minute drive or 30 minutes by regular bus service).

### **Staff implications**

There are currently eight staff based at Hitchin County Court.

HMCS will engage with staff and the Trades Unions throughout the consultation process.

### **Cost implications**

The 2009/10 operating cost of Hitchin County Court was £204,418.<sup>12</sup>  
The closure of the court house would also remove the need for HMCS investment in backlog maintenance of around £5,000.

### **Implementation**

Should the decision to close Hitchin County Court be taken, a full implementation plan will be produced to ensure the smooth transfer of work.

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<sup>12</sup> 2009/10 HMCS operating costs (excluding staff and non cash costs).

## **Annex A – Map of proposals**

# Current courts in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley

## Legend

 HMCS Courts



## TYPE

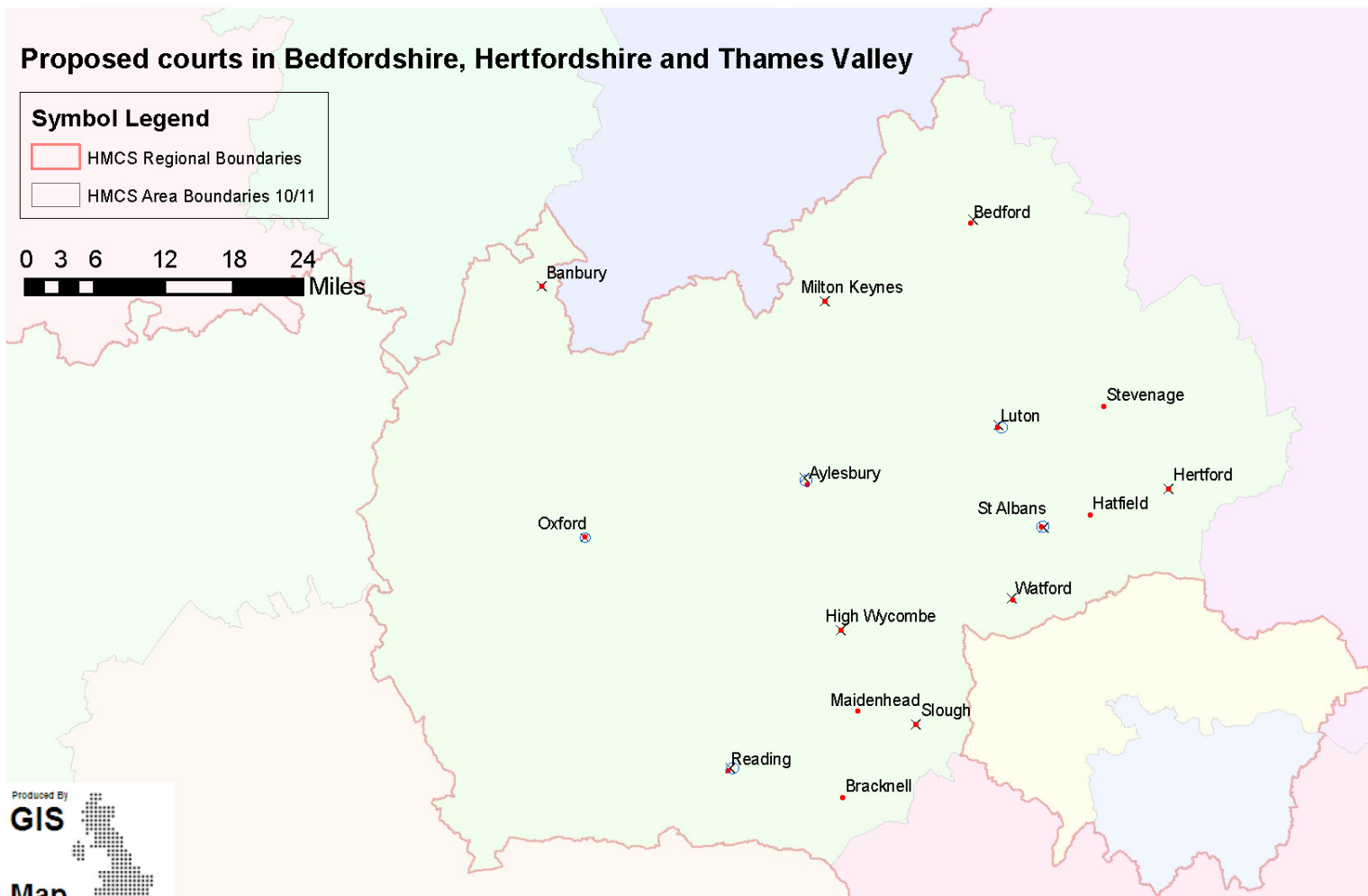
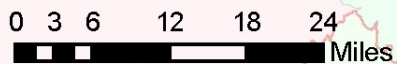
-  County/Magistrates/Crown
-  County/Crown
-  County/Magistrates
-  Magistrates/Crown
-  Magistrates
-  County
-  Crown



# Proposed courts in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley

## Symbol Legend

-  HMCS Regional Boundaries
-  HMCS Area Boundaries 10/11



## Questionnaire

We would welcome responses to the following questions set out in this consultation paper.

**Question 1a. What comments would you like to make on the proposals for the future provision of magistrates' courts services in Bedfordshire?**

**Question 1b. Please describe any particular impacts that should be taken into account when considering the proposals for magistrates' courts in Bedfordshire and why.**

**Question 1c. Will the proposals for magistrates' courts in Bedfordshire have a direct impact on you? If yes please provide further details. (Your information will assist in reviewing the equality impact assessment.)**



**Question 2a. What comments would you like to make on the proposals for the future provision of magistrates' courts services in Hertfordshire (including Local Justice Area / Bench mergers)?**

**Question 2b. Please describe any particular impacts that should be taken into account when considering the proposals for magistrates' courts in Hertfordshire and why.**

**Question 2c. Will the proposals for magistrates' courts in Hertfordshire have a direct impact on you? If yes please provide further details. (Your information will assist in reviewing the equality impact assessment.)**

**Question 3a. What comments would you like to make on the proposals for the future provision of magistrates' courts services in Thames Valley (including Local Justice Area / Bench mergers)?**

**Question 3b. Please describe any particular impacts that should be taken into account when considering the proposals for magistrates' courts in Thames Valley and why.**

**Question 3c. Will the proposals for magistrates' courts in Thames Valley have a direct impact on you? If yes please provide further details. (Your information will assist in reviewing the equality impact assessment.)**

**Question 4a. What comments would you like to make on the proposals for the future provision of county court services in the Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley area?**

**Question 4b. Please describe any particular impacts that should be taken into account when considering the proposals for county courts in the Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley area and why.**

**Question 4c. Will the proposals for county courts in the Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Thames Valley area have a direct impact on you? If yes please provide further details. (Your information will assist in reviewing the equality impact assessment.)**

**Thank you for participating in this consultation exercise.**

## About you

Please use this section to tell us about yourself

<b>Full name</b>	
<b>Job title</b> or capacity in which you are responding to this consultation exercise (e.g. member of the public etc.)	
<b>Date</b>	
<b>Company name/organisation</b> (if applicable):	
<b>Address</b>	
<b>Postcode</b>	
If you would like us to acknowledge receipt of your response, please tick this box	<input type="checkbox"/> (please tick box)
Address to which the acknowledgement should be sent, if different from above	

**If you are a representative of a group**, please tell us the name of the group and give a summary of the people or organisations that you represent.

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## Contact details/How to respond

Please send your response by 15 September to:

**Jonathan Lane**  
**Area Director**  
**HMCS Bedfordshire**  
**Hertfordshire and Thames Valley Area Director's Office**  
**Central Buckinghamshire Magistrates' Court**  
**Walton Street**  
**Aylesbury**  
**Buckinghamshire**  
**HP21 7QZ**  
**Tel: 01296 554300**  
**Fax: 01296 554340**  
**Email: [jonathan.lane@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:jonathan.lane@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk)**

### Extra copies

Further paper copies of this consultation can be obtained from this address and it is also available on-line at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/index.htm>.

Alternative format versions of this publication can be requested from [marie.day5@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:marie.day5@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk) or by phone 01908 392504.

### Publication of response

A paper summarising the responses to this consultation will be published within 3 months of the end of the consultation period. The response paper will be available on-line at <http://www.justice.gov.uk/index.htm>.

### Representative groups

Representative groups are asked to give a summary of the people and organisations they represent when they respond.

### Confidentiality

Information provided in response to this consultation, including personal information, may be published or disclosed in accordance with the access to information regimes (these are primarily the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA), the Data Protection Act 1998 (DPA) and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please be aware that, under the FOIA, there is a statutory Code of Practice with which public authorities must comply and which deals, amongst other

things, with obligations of confidence. In view of this it would be helpful if you could explain to us why you regard the information you have provided as confidential. If we receive a request for disclosure of the information we will take full account of your explanation, but we cannot give an assurance that confidentiality can be maintained in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not, of itself, be regarded as binding on the Department.

The Department will process your personal data in accordance with the DPA and, in the majority of circumstances, this will mean that your personal data will not be disclosed to third parties.

## The consultation criteria

The seven consultation criteria are as follows:

1. **When to consult** – Formal consultations should take place at a stage where there is scope to influence the policy outcome.
2. **Duration of consultation exercises** – Consultations should normally last for at least 12 weeks with consideration given to longer timescales where feasible and sensible.
3. **Clarity of scope and impact** – Consultation documents should be clear about the consultation process, what is being proposed, the scope to influence and the expected costs and benefits of the proposals.
4. **Accessibility of consultation exercises** – Consultation exercises should be designed to be accessible to, and clearly targeted at, those people the exercise is intended to reach.
5. **The burden of consultation** – Keeping the burden of consultation to a minimum is essential if consultations are to be effective and if consultees' buy-in to the process is to be obtained.
6. **Responsiveness of consultation exercises** – Consultation responses should be analysed carefully and clear feedback should be provided to participants following the consultation.
7. **Capacity to consult** – Officials running consultations should seek guidance in how to run an effective consultation exercise and share what they have learned from the experience.

**These criteria must be reproduced within all consultation documents.**

## Consultation Co-ordinator contact details

If you have any complaints or comments about the consultation **process** rather than about the topic covered by this paper, you should contact Sara Edet/Andy Holmes, HMCS Consultation Co-ordinators, on 020 3334 6686/6693, or email [hmcs.consultations@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:hmcs.consultations@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk).

Alternatively, you may wish to write to the address below:

**Sara Edet/Andy Holmes**  
**HMCS Consultation Co-ordinators**  
**2.37, 2nd Floor**  
**102 Petty France**  
**London SW1H 9AJ**

If your complaints or comments refer to the topic covered by this paper rather than the consultation process, please direct them to the contact given under the **How to respond** section of this paper at page 41.





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[marie.day5@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:marie.day5@hmcourts-service.gsi.gov.uk) or by phone 01908 392504