



Written statement to Parliament HM Courts and Tribunals Service estate

From: Ministry of Justice (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-justice>),
HM Courts & Tribunals Service (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-courts-and-tribunals-service>) and **Shailesh Vara MP**
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Written Ministerial Statement made by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, Minister for the Courts and Legal Aid, Shailesh Vara.



The government is committed to modernising the way in which justice is accessed and delivered. We are investing over £700m over the next 4 years to update the court and tribunal estate, installing modern IT systems and making the justice system more efficient and effective for modern users.

Working closely with the judiciary, we have begun installing Wi-Fi and digital systems in our criminal courts but much more needs to be done. We want to make the entire justice system more accessible to everyone – witnesses, victims, claimants, police and lawyers – by using modern technology including online plea, claims and evidence systems and video conferencing, reducing the need for people to travel to court.

As part of this modernisation, the court and tribunal estate has to be updated. Many of the current 460 court buildings are underused: last year 48% of all courts and tribunals were empty for at least half their available hearing time. These buildings are expensive to maintain yet unsuitable for modern technology.

Court closures are difficult decisions; local communities have strong allegiances to their local courts and I understand their concerns. But changes to the estate are vital if we are to modernise a system which everybody accepts is unwieldy, inefficient, slow, expensive to maintain and unduly bureaucratic.

On 16 July 2015 I therefore announced a consultation on proposals to close 91 courts and tribunals in England and Wales. Over 2,100 separate responses were received, along with 13 petitions containing over 10,000 signatures. I am grateful to all who took the time to provide their views. It is clear from the responses that the service our courts and tribunals provide continues to be highly valued.

Having considered carefully all responses to the consultation, we have decided to close 86 of the 91 courts and tribunals. 64 sites will close as proposed in the consultation. A further 22 closures will take place but with changes to the original proposals. These changes, many suggested by respondents,

include the identification of suitable alternative venues, such as local civic buildings; or different venues in the HMCTS estate to those originally proposed. I am very grateful to all those who engaged with the consultation to help us to reach the best solutions.

On average, the 86 courts we are closing are used for just over a third of their available hearing time. That is equivalent to less than 2 days a week. It will still be the case that after these closures, over 97% of citizens will be able to reach their required court within an hour by car. This represents a change of just 1 percentage points for both criminal and County Courts. The proportion able to reach a tribunal within an hour by car will remain unchanged at 83%.

For each proposal in the consultation, we have considered access to justice; value for money; and efficiency. The consultation response, which is being published today, contains details of all the decisions and changes including an indicative timetable for closures, and will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

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