

Press release

1 March 2010



'REDRAWING THE MAP' –

A CONSULTATION ON COURT BOUNDARIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Northern Ireland Court Service is launching a consultation today seeking views on proposals to reform court boundaries for County Courts and Magistrates' Courts in Northern Ireland.

Historically, the geographical boundaries for County Court Divisions and Magistrates' Courts districts into which Northern Ireland is divided have been based on the boundaries for Local Government Districts. In light of the proposals to restructure local government flowing from the Review of Public Administration, the Court Service considered a number of options for redesigning court boundaries in Northern Ireland.

It concluded that there are strong arguments for moving away from the current statutory framework of rigid court boundaries for County Courts and Magistrates' Courts in Northern Ireland, and to introduce a single jurisdiction underpinned by more flexible administrative arrangements similar to that which already exists for the Crown Court and the Coroners Service.

Under the current court boundaries model there are limitations on our ability to manage the distribution of court business to facilitate the most efficient use of judicial time and court facilities. The additional flexibility which would be afforded by these proposals will enhance the judiciary's listing function and facilitate the more effective management of court business for the benefit of all court users.

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. Currently the boundaries for County Courts and Magistrates' Courts in Northern

Ireland are specified in legislation made by the Lord Chancellor, after consultation with the Lord Chief Justice.

- Each Magistrates' court district (also known as petty sessions district) is made up of one or more Local Government Districts;
 - Each county court division is made up of one or more Magistrates' court or petty sessions district.
2. The requirement that proceedings must be listed in a particular county court division means that it is not always possible to reallocate work to take account of peaks and troughs in court business volumes. In addition, the ability to more flexibly manage court business across the court estate would allow the Court Service to provide court facilities to the best effect. Cases requiring special measures could be listed at venues that provide facilities that best suit the needs of a particular case.
 3. Providing customers with access to justice at a convenient court location will always be a significant consideration when listing court business. It is not intended that these proposals should detract from that principle. The proposed administrative arrangements will provide that a decision to list a case at an alternative court venue would only be taken under certain prescribed circumstances and with the agreement of the Lord Chief Justice or local judiciary.
 4. The consultation exercise ends on 23rd April 2010 and copies of the consultation paper can be accessed from the Northern Ireland Court Service website at: www.courtsni.gov.uk or by writing to:

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