

NEWS RELEASE

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CONSULTATION ON COURT HEARING CENTRE PROPOSALS

The establishment of Court 'Hearing Centres' in Northern Ireland could mark a step forward in delivering more cost-efficient public services, according to proposals announced today by Justice Minister, Bridget Prentice MP.

Ms Prentice, who is the Minister responsible for the courts in Northern Ireland at the UK Ministry of Justice, has launched a 12 week consultation aimed at providing more cost effective services at court venues.

Under proposals drawn up by the Northern Ireland Court Service, five court houses in Northern Ireland would take part. Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane would continue to provide an over the counter service on court sitting days, but would close on non-sitting days.

The Minister described the proposals as 'a commonsense response to business volume and use of effective resources'. She said:

"The Court Service has invested significantly in modernising the delivery of services to the public in recent years. Many of those which were only available previously at local court offices can now be accessed from anywhere in Northern Ireland via the telephone, or internet, or from centralised customer service centres. Local court business does not have to be processed at local court offices.

"This is not about closure of court houses. These proposals are aimed at encouraging customers to take advantage of the convenience of modern technology and make best use of available resources. Many services, such as payment of a fine, maintenance payments and the lodgement of court papers, can now be completed without the expense and inconvenience of travelling to a court office.

"The result is a speedier, more convenient and user-friendly experience and, I believe an outcome that best meets the needs of today's citizens. The increase in business volume via the telephone and internet would support that view."

The Minister emphasised that the consultation exercise is aimed at assessing customer preference:

"The court estate in Northern Ireland is kept under regular review to ensure that the accommodation is meeting the needs of everyone using it. The purpose of this consultation is to facilitate choice and assess customers' views on making local court office services available when they are going to be used."

The consultation ends on 3 April 2009.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. Bridget Prentice is Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice and has responsibility for the courts in Northern Ireland.
2. The Northern Ireland Court Service delivers services at 21 court houses across Northern Ireland.
3. Court Service officials will be available to meet with interested parties at each of the five venues on the following dates:

Bangor courthouse – Monday 23 February 2009 at 4.00pm

Larne courthouse – Wednesday 25 February 2009 at 4.00pm

Limavady courthouse – Thursday 26 February 2009 at 4.00pm

Magherafelt courthouse – Tuesday 3 March 2009 at 4.00pm

Strabane courthouse – Wednesday 4 March 2009 at 4.00pm

4. Copies of the consultation document can be accessed at www.courtsni.gov.uk or by post from:

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