



serving  
the community  
through the  
administration  
of justice

# Proposals for Court Hearing Centres at Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane

## Report on Consultation Exercise

June 2009

Should you require any further information about the Court Service please visit our Website at [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk) or alternatively contact us at our Communications Group.

This document will be made available in a wide range of alternative formats. Requests for alternative formats should be made to the Communications Group.

Northern Ireland Court Service  
Communications Group  
Laganside House  
23-27 Oxford Street  
Belfast BT1 3LA

Telephone 028 9032 8594  
Facsimile 028 9072 8942  
Textphone 028 9041 2920  
E-mail  
[communicationsgroup@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:communicationsgroup@courtsni.gov.uk)  
[www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)

## **Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Summary of Responses</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Responses to Specific Questions</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusion and Next Steps</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Annex A – List of Respondents</b>	<b>18</b>

## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This document is the post-consultation report for the consultation paper “Proposals for Court Hearing Centres at Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane”.
- 1.2 This report covers:
- the background to the consultation
  - a summary of responses to the consultation
  - a detailed response to the specific questions raised in the consultation; and
  - the next steps following this consultation.
- 1.3 Further copies of this report and the consultation paper can be obtained by contacting:
- Angela Barratt  
Consultation Co-ordinator  
Communications Group  
Northern Ireland Court Service  
Laganside House  
23 – 27 Oxford Street  
BELFAST  
BT1 3LA  
Telephone – 028 9041 2386  
Facsimile – 028 9072 8942  
E-mail – [angelabarratt@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:angelabarratt@courtsni.gov.uk)
- 1.4 A copy of this report will be sent to all those who responded to the consultation and it will be placed on the Northern Ireland Court Service website at: [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)
- 1.5 You may make additional copies of this report without seeking permission. If you require further printed copies of this report, we would invite you to access the document through our website and make copies yourself. If you do not have access to the internet and require us to provide you with further copies, please contact the Consultation Co-ordinator at the address at paragraph 1.3 above with your specific request.
- 1.6 This document is available in alternative formats on request. Please contact the Consultation Co-ordinator with your request.

## 2.0 Background

- 2.1 The consultation paper “Proposals for Court Hearing Centres at Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane” was published on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2009.
- 2.2 It invited comments on proposals to establish Hearing Centres at the above-named court venues in Northern Ireland. Hearing Centres would open only on days when a court is sitting at the venue. Where a court venue is presently used for other ad hoc hearings, for example tribunals or inquests, this will continue to be the case and the court office will continue to be open on these days also.
- 2.3 The paper noted that over the past ten years, the Northern Ireland Court Service (“the Court Service”) has invested significantly to modernise the delivery of services to the public and many of the services which were previously only available at a local court office can now be accessed by telephone, internet or through centralised customer service centres. Accordingly, although Hearing Centre venues would be closed on non-court sitting days, customers would still be able to access services in a variety of different ways.
- 2.4 The consultation paper also noted that the number of customers using court office services at each of the proposed Hearing Centre locations is low on non-court sitting days, ranging from two customers per day in Magherafelt to five customers per day in Bangor. It was suggested that this did not represent an efficient use of these facilities. Maintaining court venues as Hearing Centres would mean that current staffing levels are retained. However staff would be relocated on non-court days which would enable resources to be used more efficiently and allow for contingency planning for peak periods.
- 2.5 It was recognised that some customers still wished to be able to conduct business face to face in a court office. The consultation paper noted that the implementation of a new Integrated Court Operations System (“ICOS”) ICT platform means that it is no longer necessary for customers to attend at a particular courthouse to transact business. Through ICOS, court staff at all courthouses can now process payments, respond to queries and accept papers regardless of where the relevant proceedings took place.

- 2.6 Under the proposals, Hearing Centres will continue to be open on court sitting days (i.e. a day when any hearing is taking place) and on those days they will continue to provide a full range of court office services. Customers who wish to transact business at these particular court offices will still be able to do so during court sitting days.
- 2.7 Further, specific consultation questions were asked in relation to the following issues:
- Does the establishment of Hearing Centres strike an appropriate balance between the provision of quality services and ensuring that public money is used efficiently?
  - Do you consider that the Hearing Centre proposals make adequate provision for those customers who wish to transact business over the counter at these court offices?
  - Are there any services currently provided by the court office which could not be accessed through one of the alternative channels or at the court office on court days?
- 2.8 The consultation period closed on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2009 and this report summarises the responses and notes the conclusions drawn from the consultation exercise.
- 2.9 A total of 17 responses were received. Of these, one respondent had no comments, views or observations to make on the consultation.
- 2.10 In addition to receiving these written responses, the Court Service held a public meeting at each of the proposed Hearing Centre venues to give interested parties the opportunity to discuss the proposals with Court Service officials. These meetings were publicised in the media and advertised in the local press, on the Court Service website and at the local court venues.

- 2.11 Unfortunately there were no attendees at the Bangor public meeting. While attendance at the remaining public meetings was low, we welcomed the opportunity to hear and explore the issues raised by court users.
- 2.12 The Northern Ireland Court Service is grateful to all those who took the time to respond or to meet with us. **A full list of respondents is at Annex A.**

## 3.0 Summary of Responses

- 3.1 Of the 16 substantive responses received to the consultation paper –
- 3 were from solicitors or solicitor associations;
  - 3 were from political representatives;
  - 3 were from public sector organisations;
  - 3 were from the judiciary;
  - 2 were from staff or staff representatives;
  - 1 was from a local authority; and
  - 1 was from the voluntary sector.
- 3.2 The majority of respondents commented more generally on the proposals in addition to or instead of answering the specific questions posed. The main themes emerging from the consultee responses have been summarised below.

### Access to court office services

- 3.3 A majority of the respondents argued that the Hearing Centres proposals would unduly restrict access to court office services. It was argued that any reduction in service levels was unacceptable and that court offices should remain open five days a week.
- 3.4 *Court Service response* – “As indicated in the consultation paper, the Court Service has modernised the way in which we interact with our customers. Many of the services which were previously only available at a local court office can now be accessed by telephone, internet or through centralised customer service centres. This has significantly reduced the need for customers to attend their local court office to transact business, which is borne out by the low volume of customers on non-court sitting days.”
- 3.5 “We recognise that some customers still wish to be able to conduct business face to face in a court office and under these proposals, Hearing Centres will continue to be open on court sitting days. Customers who wish to transact business at these particular court offices will still be able to do so on any sitting days. Having reviewed the nature and volume of the transactions carried out on non-court sitting days we do not consider that customers will be disadvantaged by these proposals.”

### Increase the number of court sittings

- 3.6 A number of respondents argued that an alternative course of action would be to increase the number of sittings at the proposed Hearing Centre venues, for example by holding youth court or family court sittings or by having additional sittings to reduce the pressure at the main court venues.
- 3.7 *Court Service response* – “Unfortunately, the lack of appropriate accommodation at most of the Hearing Centre venues (for example, an appropriate courtroom layout, adequate consultation rooms and witness waiting facilities) makes them unsuitable for youth or family court business. The cost and restricted space to provide additional facilities is considered prohibitive.”
- 3.8 “However, Hearing Centre venues will continue to be used for additional ad hoc sittings when required and on any such days, the court office will be open.”

### Proposals based on financial considerations

- 3.9 A number of respondents argued that the Hearing Centre proposals were motivated solely by financial considerations. Conversely, others regarded that the level of savings was too small to be worthwhile.
- 3.10 *Court Service response* - “It is accepted that financial considerations are an important aspect given the budgetary constraints facing all public sector organisations today. However, there are a number of other benefits to be derived from the Hearing Centre proposals. It is anticipated that basing staff at other court offices will enhance their skills in a wider range of work, provide greater flexibility and will improve the management of workload pressures.”
- 3.11 One of the respondents suggested that rather than moving staff to a central court venue on non-court sitting days, additional work should be processed by staff at the proposed Hearing Centres. This was also raised at the Limavady public meeting.
- 3.12 *Court Service response* – “We have considered this option which would deliver some benefits, however we consider that the maximum flexibility and benefits are realised by centralising staff at other court venues on non-court sitting days.”

“The level of savings have been estimated at £151k per year, which includes a proportion of annual expenditure on security and other running costs. While this is a small amount in the context of the overall Court Service budget, it is by no means insignificant. Estimated efficiency savings will be kept under review.”

#### Staffing and practical issues

3.13 The Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance raised a number of concerns about the impact of the proposals on staff.

*Court Service response* – “Any redeployment of staff arising from the Hearing Centre proposals will be managed in accordance with established policy and procedures. Local management will continue to deploy staff to a particular venue having carefully considered business needs, required skills for the hearing or work being done, the personal circumstances of individual staff and the estimated length of their complete working day.”

3.14 Staff at Bangor court office also raised a number of practical issues about the impact of the proposals on day to day operations. However, all of these issues will be addressed as part of a Hearing Centres Implementation Plan.

#### Hearings Centres as a first step to closure

3.15 Six of the respondents suggested that Hearing Centres are a precursor to the full closure of the court venues. This was also a common theme at the public meetings held at Larne, Limavady and Strabane.

3.16 *Court Service response* – “The Hearing Centre proposals are about making best use of our investment in technology and delivering modern, high quality, cost effective services. They are not about closing court venues. However, as was stated in the consultation paper, the court estate in Northern Ireland is kept under regular review to ensure that the accommodation is meeting the needs of everyone using it. Any proposals for court closures would be subject to a separate public consultation exercise.”

#### Adverse impact on court lists

3.17 One of the respondents argued that the Hearing Centre proposals would have an adverse impact on court lists at other court venues.

*Court Service response* – “This is incorrect. Given that the number of court sittings at Hearing Centre venues is not affected by these proposals, there is no impact on court business elsewhere.”

Decision for local Minister

- 3.18 One of the respondents suggested that, in view of the current on-going debate about the devolution of policing and justice, a decision regarding Hearing Centres would be better left to a locally elected and democratically accountable Minister from the Northern Ireland Assembly.
- 3.19 *Court Service response* – “The courts in Northern Ireland are currently the Ministerial responsibility of the Lord Chancellor. We recognise the value of informed local input and have sought this through our consultation exercise. However we do not consider that it would be appropriate to ‘freeze’ decisions in relation to the efficient running of the courts pending the devolution of justice.”

## 4.0 Response to Specific Questions

- 4.1 For the purpose of this section, where a respondent has provided a general comment which relates to one of the specific consultation questions, those comments may be reflected below.

### **Question 1**

***Does the establishment of Hearing Centres strike an appropriate balance between the provision of quality services and ensuring that public money is used efficiently?***

- 4.2 The Police Service of Northern Ireland, Probation Board for Northern Ireland, and Victim Support Northern Ireland are content that the proposals strike an appropriate balance between the provision of quality services and ensuring that public money is used efficiently.
- 4.3 The solicitor respondents argued that there should be no change to the current arrangements and that quality service requires access to a local court five days a week.
- 4.4 George Robinson MLA, Councillor Alan Robinson and Larne Borough Council suggested that the Hearing Centre proposals represent an unacceptable loss of public services and that they would have a disproportionate impact on those sections of society who would be less able to access IT enabled services. Larne Borough Council also suggested that it was another attempt to remove services from the town under the guise of efficiency.
- 4.5 Some of the respondents and attendees at the public meetings argued that the proposals would increase the burden on the courts and court staff on sitting days, possibly resulting in delays, over-crowding and the need for additional staff.

*Court Service response* – “Given the low levels of customer traffic on non-court sitting days, we are satisfied that this could be easily accommodated on days when a Hearing Centre was open.”

- 4.6 “As indicated in the consultation paper, our investment in technology has enabled us to move away from fragmented local administration, where queries could only be processed at a particular location, to a fully integrated service capable of providing a faster response to public need. Customers are now accessing our services through our new service delivery channels. Some respondents felt that customers who did not have internet access would be most disadvantaged, however we would emphasise many of our services can now be accessed by telephone.”
- 4.7 “The low numbers of customers on non-court sitting days means that it is simply not an efficient use of resources to retain staff at the proposed Hearing Centre venues on these days. Customers who wish to transact business at these particular court offices would still be able to do this on court sitting days.”
- 4.8 “In exceptional circumstances, where a person needed to conduct urgent business on a day when a Hearing Centre was closed and was unable to do so in any other way, they would be able to contact the main court venue or a customer service centre by telephone or email to make appropriate arrangements.”
- 4.9 At the Strabane public meeting, we were asked if we had taken into consideration the number of telephone callers at the proposed Hearing Centre venues.

*Court Service response* – “We did not carry out a survey of telephone callers because this service would continue to be available; staff would remain available on non-court days to answer queries, albeit from an alternative location.”

- 4.10 “We remain satisfied that the Hearing Centre proposals strike an appropriate balance between the provision of quality services and ensuring that public money is used efficiently.”

## **Question 2**

***Do you consider that the Hearing Centre proposals make adequate provision for those customers who wish to transact business over the counter at these court offices?***

4.11 A number of respondents repeated the assertion that access to justice required the ability to have services available at the local court five days a week and that there should be no reduction in current service levels.

4.12 It was suggested that the Hearing Centre proposals could have an adverse impact on a person who was required to pay a fine on a date when a Hearing Centre was closed and that this could result in the unnecessary issue of committal warrants to the police, together with the associated expense.

4.13 *Court Service response* – “We recognise that some people need the entirety of the time allowed to pay a fine. However, where the last date for payment fell on a day when a Hearing Centre was closed, and the individual was unable to make the payment through any of the other service channels, they would be able to contact the main court venue or customer service centre by phone to make appropriate arrangements. In addition, it is standard practice to allow a short time to elapse between the final date for payment and the issue of a warrant to allow for unexpected delay such as payments delayed in the post.”

4.14 Some solicitors also suggested that court staff provide an invaluable source of information leaflets and advice to litigants in person.

*Court Service response* – “We recognise the importance of these services and note that the information leaflets are available on-line or can be posted on request. In any event, we do not consider that there would be any significant inconvenience if a customer wished to visit a particular Hearing Centre on a court sitting day.”

4.15 A number of the respondents emphasised the importance of ensuring that any revised opening hours were widely publicised so as to avoid unnecessary inconvenience to customers.

- 4.16 *Court Service response* – “We would ensure that the regular opening hours were published clearly both within and outside Hearing Centre venues. Details of the days when a Hearing Centre would be open to deal with ad hoc business would be published on the Court Service website and updated weekly. Customers can also contact the Court Service Information Centre which will hold details of the opening times for each of the Hearing Centres venues.”

### **Question 3**

***Are there any services currently provided by the court office which could not be accessed through one of the alternative channels or at the court office on court days?***

- 4.17 At the Strabane public meeting, a solicitor noted that he used the live television link facilities in the court office on non-court sitting days to consult with clients being held in custody at prison.

*Court Service response* – “We recognise the convenience to solicitors in having this service available and note that the facilities would continue to be available for use on court sitting days (at least nine days per month). On non sitting days, solicitors could avail of live link facilities at other court venues and avoid the need to travel to a custodial establishment. We would ensure that information about the facilities available at other court venues is published on the Court Service website.”

- 4.18 Both the Lord Chief Justice and Victim Support Northern Ireland emphasised the importance of ensuring that pre-trial familiarisation visits for victims and witnesses continued to be facilitated at the proposed Hearing Centre venues.

- 4.19 *Court Service response* – “Victim Support Northern Ireland agrees that the good relationships which exist between court staff and Victim Support staff at each of the venues will ensure that the majority of witnesses would not be disadvantaged through the proposed reduction in opening hours. However, we recognise that in cases where vulnerable and intimidated witnesses are involved and special measures are to be provided, it may not be feasible to arrange a pre-trial visit during normal opening hours. In these exceptional cases, we would work with Victim Support to accommodate the visit at some other suitable time.”

## 5.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

- 5.1 The Court Service has considered carefully all the responses made in this consultation exercise and the issues raised at the various public meetings. Having done so, we remain satisfied that the Hearing Centre proposals strike an appropriate balance between the provision of quality services and ensuring that public money is used efficiently. We therefore intend to proceed to establish Hearing Centres at the existing court venues in Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane.
- 5.2 As previously indicated, Government places a priority on providing modern, high quality, cost effective services. Taking into account the low numbers of customers attending these venues on non-court sitting days, it is not an efficient use of resources to retain staff at the proposed Hearing Centre venues on those days.
- 5.3 It is clear from the consultation exercise that many of the respondents oppose in principle any reduction in the opening hours of their local court office. However, while many have referred to the important services available at the court office, we remain satisfied that the combination of alternative delivery channels and the availability of the court office on sitting days will mean that customers will not be disadvantaged.
- 5.4 We recognise the importance of ensuring that all the practical issues underpinning the implementation of these proposals are carefully considered. It is essential to ensure that customers are aware of any revised opening times at a Hearing Centre venue. We will also implement effective handling of telephone calls, fax and mail on non-court sitting days.
- 5.5 All these issues will be addressed as part of a Hearing Centre Implementation Plan which will be developed in conjunction with management of the relevant court venues. In order to allow sufficient time to work through these issues, the date for the introduction of the new Hearing Centre arrangements will be **1<sup>st</sup> September 2009.**

5.6 A copy of this report will be sent to all those who responded to the consultation exercise and it will be placed on the Northern Ireland Court Service website at [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk). The Court Service is grateful to all those who considered and responded to the Hearing Centre proposals and we shall continue to work with local stakeholders to ensure the satisfactory implementation of the revised arrangements.

**NORTHERN IRELAND COURT SERVICE**

**June 2009**

## **Annex A**

The Northern Ireland Court Service was grateful to receive responses from the following parties, bodies, groups, agencies and individuals.

### ***List of Respondents***

Billy Armstrong MLA  
David R Brewster Solicitor  
District Judge Keegan  
Larne Borough Council  
Limavady Solicitors' Association and R G Connell & Son Solicitors  
Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland  
Loughs Agency  
John McCartney, Chairman of Londonderry Division of the Northern Ireland Lay Magistrates' Association  
Northern Ireland Policing Board  
Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance  
O'Rorke, McDonald and Tweed Solicitors  
Police Service of Northern Ireland  
Probation Board for Northern Ireland  
Councillor Alan Robinson  
Alderman George Robinson MLA  
Staff of Bangor Courthouse  
Victim Support Northern Ireland





INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For further information on the work of the Northern Ireland Court Service please contact

**Northern Ireland Court Service**

Communications Group  
Laganside House  
23-27 Oxford Street  
Belfast BT1 3LA

Telephone 028 9032 8594  
Facsimile 028 9072 8942  
Textphone 028 9041 2920  
Email [communicationsgroup@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:communicationsgroup@courtsni.gov.uk)  
[www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)