



Ms M Carney
Chief Executive
Sefton Council

Our ref: PMcG/ER

Your ref:

23 June 2010

Dear Ms Carney

HM COURTS SERVICE ESTATES

I am writing to inform you that this afternoon the Secretary of State for Justice laid a Written Ministerial Statement announcing a consultation on the most strategic locations for magistrates' and county courts across England and Wales. Proposals were based on a series of principles around the importance of operating high quality courts within a reasonable travelling distance for communities, while ensuring value for money for taxpayers.

In the North West, the number of magistrates' and county courts does not reflect changes in population, workload or transport and communication links over the many years since they were opened. Many courts are considerably underused because there is insufficient workload for the number of courts in this area. Many others lack appropriate facilities for victims and witnesses, do not have secure facilities for prisoners, or are not accessible to disabled court users. These deficiencies limit the type of case that the judiciary can hear, and brings the standard of facilities below that expected in a modern justice system.

We are therefore inviting comment on the proposal to close the following courts:

Magistrates' courts:

Northwich Magistrates' Court; Southport Magistrates' Court; Knowsley Magistrates' Court; Whitehaven Magistrates' Court; Penrith Magistrates' Court; Rawtenstall Magistrates' Court; City of Salford Magistrates' Court; Rochdale, Middleton and Heywood Magistrates' Court.

County courts;

Northwich County Court; Southport County Court; Penrith County Court; Runcorn County Court; Whitehaven County Court (to be relocated to Workington Magistrates'



Court); Rawtenstall County Court; Chorley County Court; Salford County Court; Bury County Court.

The consultation also includes proposals to reduce the counter service at Kendal County Court and to remove payment facilities from counters in Greater Manchester and Lancashire magistrates' courts.

In addition, following an earlier consultation, without further delay the Secretary of State has also decided to close Leigh County Court, which hasn't been in use since an arson attack two years ago.

The consultation also sets out proposals on the merger of a number of Local Justice Areas to facilitate the changes. This will allow magistrates in these areas to be deployed more flexibly and give them the opportunity to make their vital expertise and experience available to a wider community.

In the Region, we are consulting on the following mergers:

- Liverpool and Knowsley to create Liverpool and Knowsley Local Justice Area
- North and South Sefton to create a single Sefton Local Justice Area
- Vale Royal and Chester, Ellesmere Port & Neston to create West Cheshire Local Justice Area
- Eden with Carlisle and District to form Carlisle & District and Eden Local Justice Area
- Whitehaven with West Allerdale and Keswick to form Whitehaven, West Allerdale and Keswick Local Justice Area.
- Blackburn, Darwen and Ribble Valley with Hyndburn to create East Lancashire Local Justice Area
- Bury with Rochdale, Middleton and Heywood to create the Bury and Rochdale Local Justice Area
- Manchester City with the City of Salford to create the Manchester and Salford Local Justice Area

It is important that those living in local communities in the area should not have to make excessively long or difficult journeys to attend court. At the same time there must be recognition of the infrequency with which most people need to visit a court, compared to other public services which they use and travel to more regularly.

In addition, geographical proximity for all court users should not and cannot be the sole concern. Providing people with appropriate access to justice does not necessarily mean providing a courthouse in every town or city. I believe 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.

Spending money to keep underused and unsuitable courts open where there is no business need is unfair to taxpayers and users of the court, particularly if it means they will receive an inferior service. I have considered the overall courts estate for the area in the context of the increasing amount of civil work resolved before coming into court, the falling numbers of cases heard in magistrates' courts, and the improved efficiency with which the magistrates' courts are dealing with cases. Until we align the number and location of our

courts with the needs of our communities, the taxpayer will continue to pay for their upkeep and all other unnecessary costs being incurred by HMCS and the rest of the justice system.

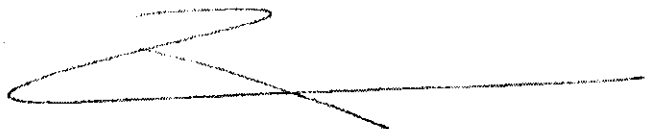
The courts we are consulting on nationally have annual running costs (excluding staffing costs) of around £15m per year and have a maintenance backlog of around £21.5m. Following a full analysis of responses to the consultation, and a decision on whether and which courts to close, we will assess the level of savings that could be achieved and the potential value that could be released from the disposal of the properties. As well as savings to HMCS there will also be savings for other justice agencies by focusing their attendance at a single accessible location within a community.

I believe these proposals would enable HMCS and its partners to provide vital public services that are also cost efficient. I am particularly interested in your views on the proposals set out in the consultation (available at: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/consultations/consultations.htm>) and hope you will be able to respond.

The Secretary of State will take all views expressed into account before making any decision on whether or which courts ought to be closed as part of the rationalisation.

I am keen for this consultation to involve real dialogue and debate with our partners across the Region, and for you to have the opportunity to raise any issues or concerns which we need to take into consideration with me. I would be happy to meet to discuss these issues over the course of the consultation period if you wish.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized loop followed by a horizontal line that extends to the right and then curves downwards.

Paul McGladrigan
Area Director
Cheshire and Merseyside