



DEBATE PACK

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Court Closures and Access to Justice

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Summary

On Thursday 20 June a backbench business debate is expected to take place on Court Closures and Access to Justice in the House of Commons chamber. Bambos Charalambous MP made representations to the Backbench business committee on 5 March for this debate to take place.

Since 2010 the courts and tribunals estate has changed significantly because of a multi-stage estates reform programme. This briefing provides an overview of those changes and the impact it has had on the provision of courts and tribunals services.

Following [the report by Lord Justice Briggs into Civil Courts Structure](#) in 2016, wider reforms of the justice system have been proposed and piloted as part of a “modernisation” project. This has included a focus on alternative service provision and greater use of technology in Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals System (HMCTS). An initial attempt to legislate for a broad package of reforms was interrupted by the 2017 General Election, but since then several pieces of primary legislation have taken-on those proposed reforms.

The Government’s [Courts and Tribunals \(Online Procedure\) Bill](#) was introduced in the Lords in May 2019. Its Lords Committee stage took place on Monday 10 June. The Bill provides a legislative framework for the Government to make more extensive use of online and online-only court and tribunal proceedings as alternatives to in-person proceedings. The House of Lords Library note on the Bill as introduced [is available here](#).

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

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1. Background

1.1 The duty to provide for courts

An effective legal system relies upon a network of well-maintained and fit-for-purpose courts. Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service's (HMCTS) estate is the physical embodiment of the state's judicial powers, and for that power to function in the public interest, individuals must have effective access to that estate.¹ [Section 1 of the Courts Act 2003](#) places a duty on the Lord Chancellor to ensure an "efficient and effective system" to support the "carrying on of business" of courts in England and Wales, including the Supreme Court, the Court of Protection, county courts, family courts and magistrates' courts.

1.2 The courts estate: a brief history

Successive governments have identified the courts estate as a target for efficiency savings. This is partly because of its history. The courts system has been centralised comparatively recently. Court buildings, and the administrative systems which support them, have grown up in a piecemeal fashion, with local authorities responsible for a lot of the administration and funding.

The Government's most recent national consultation document, [Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate](#) identifies the historically decentralised nature of courts provision as key factor behind its proposals to rationalise the estate:

The current court and tribunal estate is a legacy of the genesis of HMCTS. Less than 20 years ago around 50 organisations carried out the work now performed by HMCTS. This has resulted in an estate which was not in the main assembled as part of a planned process but instead inherited from earlier organisations with different standards and priorities, bequeathing to HMCTS multiple buildings in many locations, together with a variety of different building specifications. At present, there are over 60 towns in England and Wales with more than one court or tribunal building, and over 20 with more than two.²

There were moves to centralise courts administration from the 1970s.³ However, at the beginning of the 21st Century, while the rest of the court service were under the direct jurisdiction of the Lord Chancellor, magistrates' courts were still locally administered. Following the 2001

¹ A. Le Sueur, 'The Foundations of Justice' in J. Jowell, D. Oliver and C. O'Conneide (eds) *The Changing Constitution* (OUP 2015) p222

² HMCTS and MoJ, [Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate \(Jan 2018\)](#) para 2.1

³ See [Where next for the Court Service? The struggle between the Judiciary and the Executive](#), Constitution Unit blog, 14 August 2013 and National Audit Office, [Early progress in transforming courts and tribunals](#), HC101 2017-19, 9 May 2018, p 10

Auld Review,⁴ the courts system was unified under Her Majesty's Courts Service from 2005.

1.3 Closures of courts under Labour

The Labour government closed 125 magistrates' courts between 1997 and 2009⁵ although it opened 25 new ones over the same period. This represented a closure of around one in five magistrates' courts.⁶ Labour also closed 24 county courts between 1997 and 2008.⁷

In October 2009, the Labour government announced the closure of one more county court and consulted on the closure of another, along with a further 20 magistrates' courts. The then Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, confirmed in March 2010 that those magistrates' courts would close, but postponed a decision on the remaining county court.⁸ In the event, Kenneth Clarke, then Justice Secretary under the Coalition government, announced that this too would close.⁹

⁴ The Right Honourable Lord Justice Auld, [A Review of the Criminal Courts of England and Wales](#), 2001

⁵ [HC Deb 20 October 2009 cc1373-1374WA](#)

⁶ There were estimated to have been 497 courts in 1997, leading to a net change of -21%. See [HC 295941, 5 Nov 2009](#).

⁷ [HC Deb 5 February 2009 c1401W](#)

⁸ [HC Deb 18 Mar 2010 c73WS](#)

⁹ [HC Deb 23 June 2010 c15WS](#)

2. Closures since 2010

2.1 How many courts have closed?

Based on the available information, between 2010 and 2019,

- **162 magistrates' courts** have closed, out of 323,
- **90 county courts** have closed, out of 240,
- **18 dedicated tribunal buildings** have closed, out of 83,
- **17 family courts** have closed, out of 185,
- **8 crown courts** have closed, out of 92.

In total 295 court facilities (the individual services listed above) closed during this time.¹⁰ These are listed in the section 7.

2.2 Proceeds from the sale of courts

In response to Parliamentary questions, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) has released information on the sale status of closed courts. This shows:

- The courts sold between 2010 and February 2018 raised £224 million for the public purse ([HC127599](#), 08 February 2018).
- Total maintenance costs for the 14 courts which had not yet been sold by October 2018 stood at £222,000 at that time ([HC191971](#), 15 November 2018).
- The cost of lease dilapidation on closed courts since 2010 was £3.6 million ([HC191970](#), 15 November 2018).
- £2.0 million was spent on exiting leases as a result of court closures since April 2015 ([HC191970](#), 15 November 2018).

The sale status of each court that has closed since 2015 is shown on HM Courts and Tribunals Service's [court disposals website](#).

2.3 Estate reform programmes since 2010

The Court Estate Reform Programme 2010-2014

The first programme, **Court Estate Reform Programme** (CERP) began in 2010 with regional consultations on closing 103 magistrates' courts and 54 county courts.¹¹ The then Justice Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, announced the consultations in a Written Ministerial Statement.¹²

Each regional consultation document set out the guiding principles that inform the Estates Reform Programme, which included:

- improving utilisation to at least 80%;
- ensuring access to courts: most of the public were to be within a 1 hour commute of their nearest court by public transport.¹³

¹⁰ Source: Ministry of Justice, personal communication: Please note that these numbers may not tally with those reported elsewhere because some sources count the closure of *premises* and others count the closure of services in a given location.

¹¹ Sixteen regional consultation documents were published as part of a Deposited Paper [DEP2010-1340](#), 23 June 2010 together with a list of all the proposed closures

¹² [HC Deb 23 June 2010 c15WS](#)

¹³ See for example Ministry of Justice, [Proposal on the provision of court services in Greater Manchester](#), CP HMCS CP09/10 (part of [DEP2010-1340](#)) 23 June 2010, p. 3

The consultation indicated that travel times should not be the “sole or primary concern”. The Government argued that it was more important for access to justice for the courts to be efficient and to provide a good quality service. Following the consultation, it was decided that 15 courts, out of the 157 consulted upon, would be kept open.¹⁴

In the end, the **2010 CERP consultation resulted in the closure of 140 courts across England and Wales from the then total of 530 operational buildings.**¹⁵

The tribunals system was added to HM Court Service’s remit in 2011, and the service was renamed [Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service](#). This brought **75 tribunal buildings** onto the estate.

There were also **five** further individual court closure consultations published in 2013 and 2014.¹⁶

As a result of these 145 closures and the 75 additional tribunal buildings, by the time of the next national consultation in 2015, the HMCTS estate contained **460 court and tribunal buildings.**¹⁷

The Estates Reform Project 2015-present

In July 2015, the Conservative government published further regional consultations, together with a national consultation document, [Proposal on the provision of court and tribunal estate in England and Wales](#).¹⁸

The Government set out overarching principles under three themes:

- ensuring access to justice;
- delivering value for money; and
- enabling efficiency in the longer term.¹⁹

It proposed the closure of a total of 91 courts and tribunals. On 11 February 2016, the Government published its [national response](#) announcing that **86** of the courts and tribunals would close.²⁰

There were 110 responses directed at the national consultation paper.²¹ 15 of supported the proposals, but a majority, 56, were critical. Key concerns raised included:

- increased travel times for court users;²²

¹⁴ HC Deb 14 December 2010 c816

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. See [DEP2013-1679; Proposal on the future of Neath Magistrates' Court](#); 26 September 2013, [Gwent magistrates' courts: proposals for the future](#); June 2014; [Bracknell Magistrates' Court: proposal on its future](#); 18 June 2014, [Knutsford Crown Court: proposal on its future](#), 25 June 2014; [Spalding Magistrates' Court: proposal on its future](#), 1 July 2014

¹⁷ MoJ/HMCTS [Proposal on the provision of court and tribunal estate in England and Wales](#), 2015, p. 6

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 7-8

²⁰ See Appendix

²¹ Ministry of Justice and HMCTS, [Response to the proposal on the provision of court and tribunal estate in England and Wales](#) (2016) 11; See Section 2.3 for analysis of the consultation documents

²² Ministry of Justice and HMCTS, [Response to the proposal on the provision of court and tribunal estate in England and Wales](#) (2016) p2. In addition to these national consultation responses, there were 2,100 responses to the regional consultations;

- the fact that courts were being closed before the technological changes were in place;²³
- that the Government had not got the right balance between access to justice and cutting costs;²⁴
- delays resulting from reduced court capacity;²⁵ and
- the impact of the changes on the most vulnerable court users.²⁶

The Government responded that:

- access to justice did not depend on access to a physical court, and the overall changes to estimated travel times were small;²⁷
- utilisation rates were low and money saved would be reinvested into HMCTS;²⁸
- it was confident there was sufficient capacity in the estate and that increased use of technology would expand that capacity;²⁹ and
- there would be pilots which would be reviewed.³⁰

In 2016, the Estate Reform Project was split into two programmes:

- **Estates Reform Project 1** (1 September 2015 to 29 March 2019) which the HMCTS says is “reviewing the utilisation of estates and removing surplus capacity”
- **Estates Reform Project 2** (1 August 2016 to 29 April 2022) which HMCTS characterises as “assessing the potential for further consolidation of the estate as reform is delivered.”³¹

The Government’s 2018 consultation document, [Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate](#) said that the closures resulting from 2015 consultation, together with separate 2016 consultations on the closure of two London courts³² will mean a reduction from **460 operational court buildings to 339**:

Together these will result in the closure of 121 buildings (including integrations within local areas, i.e. where the building being closed is in close proximity to a neighbouring building into which the workload will be moving) reducing from a total of 460 operational court and tribunal buildings to 339.³³

the Government published [seven regional government consultation response documents](#).

²³ Ibid p. 6

²⁴ Ibid p. 17

²⁵ Ibid pp. 19-20

²⁶ Ibid. p. 20

²⁷ Ibid pp. 14-16

²⁸ Ibid pp. 17-18

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ HMCTS, [Reform Update](#), May 2018, p. 24

³² MoJ/HMCTS [Response to the proposal on the future of Camberwell Green and Hammersmith Magistrates’ Courts](#), DEP 2017/122, 8 February 2017

³³ HMCTS and MoJ, [Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate \(January 2018\)](#) para 2.4

3. Future estate rationalisation: “Fit for the Future”

3.1 Individual court closures

On 18 January 2018 the Ministry of Justice and HMCTS published “[Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate](#)”, a consultation which closed on 29 March 2018.

The consultation explained that the HMCTS was seeking views on the closure on a further eight courts:

- Banbury Magistrates’ and County Court;
- Maidenhead Magistrates’ Court;
- Cambridge Magistrates’ Court;
- Chorley Magistrates’ Court;
- Fleetwood Magistrates’ Court;
- Northallerton Magistrates’ Court;
- Wandsworth County Court; and
- Blackfriars Crown Court.³⁴

On 24 July 2018; the Government announced that seven of these eight courts would be closed “with money raised reinvested into modernising the justice system.”³⁵ Cambridge Magistrates’ Court would not close because of the likely costs.

3.2 Future reform principles

[Fit for the Future](#) reiterated the three overarching principles for reform which the Government had set out in its 2015 consultation:

- ensuring access to justice;
- delivering value for money; and
- enabling efficiency in the longer term.

The new approach

However, the consultation proposed moving beyond the existing approach of rationalising court locations in smaller towns or where there were several sites in relatively close proximity. The two main strategies proposed are:

- maintaining (and in some cases enlarging) HMCTS presence in major towns and cities in England and Wales with good transport links, serving large populations (“**key strategic locations**”); and
- making greater use of other types of building (“**supplementary provision**” in less populous areas for “some types of hearing”, with the use of later starts and earlier finishes to enable continued access to justice.

³⁴ HMCTS and MoJ, [Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate](#) January 2018, para 3.8

³⁵ MOJ, HMCTS and The Rt Hon David Gauke MP Press Release [Government announces changes to court estate](#), 24 July 2018

The Government believes there will be a “high degree of consensus” about where the key strategic locations should be in each region.³⁶

However, the consultation document recognises that closure of smaller courts would present “unacceptable issues for access to justice” in some areas. It proposes to:

- use non-traditional court buildings with later start and earlier end times in some places; but
- retain some sites in remote areas where this makes more sense economically.³⁷

Alternatives to traditional court buildings

Fit for the Future pointed to the increasing use of local video links and hearings in local authority buildings. The Government anticipates that this will develop, with a range of hired venues being used, as they have been for Social Security and Child Support Tribunals in Scotland:

4.45. We anticipate that supplementary provision will have an increasing part to play in making sure that our courts and tribunals are appropriately accessible. Where we close a building and it is clear that regular – even if infrequent – physical hearings should continue to be held nearby, we will work with local partners to use non- HMCTS buildings to provide them; and where the priority that victims and witnesses should not have to travel to appear, we will make sure there are locally-available, secure and comfortable ways to appear by video-link available.

4.46. We have already established that supplementary provision can be an effective way of providing access to justice for SSCS Tribunal users in Scotland where we hire venues in 14 locations which are used on a regular, but not full-time, basis to hold hearings. These venues include community centres, village halls, church halls, conference centres and hotels.

Consultation response

The Government [published its response](#) to the *Fit for the Future* consultation on 10 May 2019.³⁸

Respondents most notably raised concerns about how the Government assesses the accessibility court facilities. The original proposals in *Fit for the future* only provided that future closures decisions would “take into account” journey times for court users.

In response to this, the Government has adopted more specific and substantive criteria for future court closures. The “revised estates principles” now provide greater detail as to what would constitute a “reasonable” journey. The expectation is that:

³⁶ HMCTS and MoJ, [Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate](#), January 2018, p. 23

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 30

³⁸ Ministry of Justice, [Response to ‘Fit for the future: Transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate’ consultation](#), 10 May 2019

the overwhelming majority of users would be able to leave home no earlier than 07:30 to attend their local court and return by 19:30 using public transport if necessary.³⁹

Future assessments will also take into account the frequency of public transport, the number of changes needed, and the cost of journeys.⁴⁰ Critics of the Government's proposals have argued that these developments do not go far enough to address the concerns raised in the consultation. Christina Blacklaws, President of the Law Society said that the issue of travel times were "not adequately addressed in the government's response" and that it would worsen with further court closures. Even with the new guidance, she noted that a "reasonable" journey could still take a number of hours.⁴¹

The Government re-iterated its view that, in the long-term, the need for physical court buildings would be lessened as a result of greater use of technology and digital hearings:

We expect that increased use of digital services will mean that fewer court and tribunals hearings will be needed in a traditional courtroom setting, and therefore fewer buildings will be needed. However, we are committed to having clear evidence that these reductions are happening before we decide to close any further sites.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid. p. 6

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The Law Society Gazette, [Court closures: new 7.30am-7.30pm travel benchmark](#), 10 May 2019

⁴² MoJ, [Response to 'Fit for the future: Transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate' consultation](#), p. 5

4. Why have courts closed?

4.1 Deficit reduction

As an “unprotected” department in the 2010 spending review, the Ministry of Justice was called on to make cuts of 25% in the four years to 2014-15.⁴³ Announcing the 2010 regional consultations, Kenneth Clarke highlighted the need to “eliminate waste and reduce costs”:

HMCS currently operates out of 530 courts, some of which do not fit the needs of modern communities. Their number and location does not reflect recent changes in population, workload or transport and communication links over the many years since they were originally opened. (...)

Closure of the courts covered in the consultation would achieve running cost savings of around £15.3 million per year. These courts also have backlog maintenance of around £21.5 million, costs that can be avoided if the closures go ahead.⁴⁴

When the results of the consultation were announced in December 2010⁴⁵ the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, Jonathan Djanogly, said that they would “save £41.5 million during the spending review period (excluding closure costs), and bring in £38.5 million in receipts from the sale of assets”.⁴⁶

Spending on Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunal Service fell between 2012/13 and 2015/16. This changed in 2016/17 when a substantial investment for court reform came through.⁴⁷

In evidence to the Justice Committee in July 2015, the then Justice Secretary Michael Gove said that, despite this, the fact that his department was unprotected was the “biggest problem” he faced:

With unerring political acumen, you have hit on the biggest problem that I face, which is that the Ministry of Justice is an unprotected Department. Even though the Chancellor and the Prime Minister are very supportive of the reform programme that I have outlined, they also recognise, as I do, that I have to play my part in making sure that we can continue to reduce the deficit, so there may be some very difficult decisions that we will have to take.⁴⁸

Because of this increased investment, the 2015 and 2018 consultation documents placed more emphasis on the wider context of court reform than on deficit reduction.

4.2 Efficiency – better utilisation rates?

The Coalition Government’s case for rationalising the estate was partly the need to improve “utilisation rates”: the percentage of time that a

⁴³ HM Treasury, [Budget 2010](#), HC 61 2010-12, June 2010

⁴⁴ [HC Deb 23 June 2010 c15WS](#)

⁴⁵ [DEP2010-2269](#) 14 December 2010

⁴⁶ HC Deb 14 December 2010 c816

⁴⁷ See section 6 below.

⁴⁸ Justice Committee, [Oral Evidence: The work of the Secretary of State for Justice](#), HC 335 2015-16, 15 July 2015

court is used when it is open. For example, average utilisation rates in magistrates’ courts was 64% in 2009/2010.⁴⁹ In July 2010, the Government set itself a target of achieving a rate of 80% in all courts.⁵⁰ By closing under-used courts, the Government aimed to increase the level of use in the rest of the facilities available.

The 2015 national consultation reported that in the financial year 2014/2015 the recorded utilisation levels were:

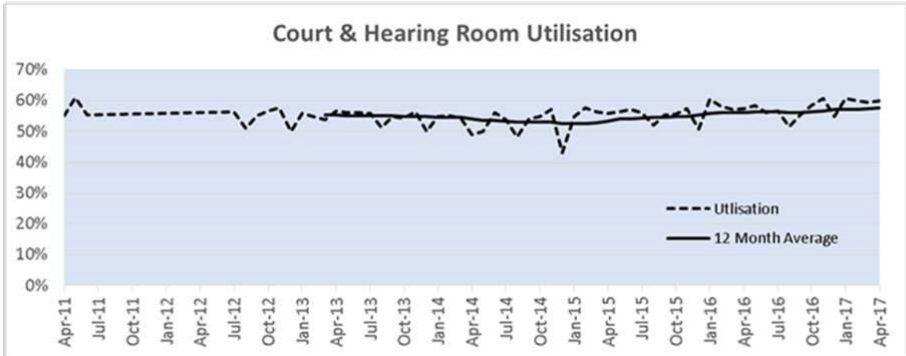
- Crown courts 71%
- County courts 53%
- Magistrates’ courts 47%
- Tribunal hearing rooms 71 % [2013/14 data]⁵¹

In each case the utilisation rate remained below the 80% level referred to by the Coalition Government during the CERP.

The 2018 national consultation, *Fit for the Future* showed that not a great deal of progress had been made by 2017, in that “overall utilisation continues to hover at around 60%”.⁵² This, the Government said, was because of a “complex combination of factors” including:

- lower workloads in some areas;
- mismatches between the size of a building and the work generated that catchment area; and
- problems in establishing how many hearings will actually go ahead on the day, particularly in courts with a small number of hearing rooms.

The 2018 consultation document provided a chart to show how utilisation rates had “remained relatively stable, despite the fact that in recent years caseloads have, save in the criminal courts, generally increased, and that where caseloads have gone up, so have the ‘sitting days’ available to deal with those cases.”



Source: HMCTS OPT data

The consultation added that analysis of utilisation rates, the factors behind it and “capacity modelling” would ensure that sound decisions were taken on the extent of further possible consolidation of the estate.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Djanogly MP, PQ 6 July 2010, col 161W
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ MoJ/HMCTS, [Proposal on the provision of court and tribunal estate in England and Wales](#), 2015, pp. 9-10
⁵² Ibid.

4.3 Releasing resources for court reform

Court reform was an important part of the Coalition government's proposals. The aim of the 2010 tranche of closures was to produce a "better, more efficient and more modern justice system".⁵³ By closing old outdated courts, the Government argued that it would be able to focus on improving and updating existing courts. Greater use of technology, for example through use of video links for hearing evidence from police officers in police stations, would make the courts more efficient. but also to "use technology more effectively so fewer people have physically to attend court for routine purposes."⁵⁴

By the time of the 2015 consultation, the Government was emphasising that capital receipts and reduced running costs would be reinvested in court reform:

In order to achieve a radical transformation of the justice system, any investment must be targeted and sequenced across all three key areas of ICT, estates and business processes to create the efficiencies that will allow HM Courts & Tribunals Service to modernise its current practices and to adopt more streamlined ways of working. We are therefore, as a first priority, addressing the current surplus capacity within the HM Courts & Tribunals Service estate. This will enable us to use the remaining estate more intelligently and flexibly, to reduce our running costs, to focus our investment on improving the estate we need for the future and to increase the multifunctional court space – allowing different court and tribunal jurisdictions to share locations. **The intention is that capital receipts from the sale of any surplus assets would be reinvested as part of the funding for the reform programme** (emphasis added).⁵⁵

Like the 2015 consultation document, *Fit for the Future* presented these two aims under the overarching principle of delivering value for money:

- To reduce the current and future cost of running the estate; and
- To maximise the capital receipts from surplus estate for reinvestment in HMCTS.⁵⁶

⁵³ [HC Deb 23 June 2010 c15WS](#)

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ MoJ/HMCTS, [Proposal on the provision of court and tribunal estate in England and Wales](#), 2015, p. 8

⁵⁶ HMCTS and MoJ, [Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate](#), January 2018, p. 19

5. Wider court reform projects

Summary

The Government has embarked on a hugely ambitious set of court reforms, involving a 2016 consultation, [Transforming Our Justice System](#).⁵⁷ The main strands of the program involve:

- closing older local courts and rationalising the court estate
- digitising paper processes and case management
- replacing physical courtroom hearings with virtual ones (where parties participate via audio or video link) or fully online dispute resolution systems.

The programme It is made up of more than [50 distinct projects](#)⁵⁸ HMCTS expects it to

- cost a total of £1.15 billion over its 10-year lifetime
- yield benefits of £1.22 billion in the 10 years from 2015-6 to 2024-25
- cut 5,000 staff
- generate annual savings of £265m from 2022-23 onwards.

The greater use of online and online-only courts and tribunals is dependent, in part, on the passage of primary legislation. The *Prison and Courts Bill* in the last Parliament included provision for the civil and family courts and for tribunals to be able to make greater use of online proceedings, but did not complete its passage through Parliament before the 2017 General Election.

Earlier in this Parliamentary session, the [Courts and Tribunals \(Judiciary and Functions of Staff\) Act 2018](#) partially implemented those pre-election proposals, but the online elements have not yet been legislated for.

The [Courts and Tribunals \(Online Procedure\) Bill](#) was introduced in the House of Lords on 1 May 2019. It is awaiting Lords Report Stage (currently anticipated for 24 June 2019) and Third Reading after which it would be expected to be introduced in the Commons. It provides the legal framework for an Online Procedure Rule Committee (OPCR). The OPCR would be able to insist that certain civil and family court, and certain tribunal proceedings, take place additionally or only by digital means.

Moves to obtain funding for major reforms of the court systems began under the Coalition government. In a written statement on 23 March 2013, the then Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Chris Grayling, announced that he had asked his department “to explore proposals for the reform of the resourcing and administration of our courts and tribunals”.⁵⁹ In March 2014, Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, then Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, the then Justice Secretary Chris Grayling and Sir Jeremy Sullivan, Senior President of Tribunals, [announced](#) a reform programme for the resourcing and administration of HMCTS. The aim of the HMCTS Reform Programme is to deliver an improved estate and modernisation of working practices through the use of modern technology. Improving the estate is one the Programme’s three aims, the others being to improve the use of IT and the allocation of work to court officials.

⁵⁷ Lord Chancellor, Lord Chief Justice, and the Senior President of Tribunals [Transforming our justice system](#) September 2016

⁵⁸ HMCTS, [HMCTS reform programme projects explained](#), last updated 11 February 2019

⁵⁹ [HC Deb 26 March 2013 c95WS](#)

5.1 The Briggs and Leveson reviews

In 2015, under the new Conservative administration, the then Lord Chief Justice commissioned two independent reports into court reform. Lord Justice Briggs published an [Interim](#) (December 2015) and [Final](#) (July 2016) report into Civil Court Structure, while Sir Brian Leveson conducted a Review of Efficiency of Criminal Proceedings, [reporting in January 2015](#).

These two reviews provided the basis for a broad range of proposed reforms, culminating in the publication [Transforming our Justice System](#), published in September 2016. This called for a shift away from a default approach of ‘advocacy before a judge in a physical courtroom’ to a mixture of ‘online, virtual and traditional hearings as best meets the circumstances of the case’.⁶⁰ Consultation took place in Autumn 2016, and the Ministry of Justice published a summary of responses in [February 2017](#).

5.2 Additional funding for courts reform

In March 2014, the Chris Grayling secured an investment package totalling £713 million including £380 million new investment for IT and estate reconfiguration to be made available between 2014/15 and 2019/20.⁶¹ On 25 November 2015, George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced that the money saved from court closures would help to fund a £700 million investment in court reform:

My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor has worked with the Lord Chief Justice and others to put forward a typically bold and radical plan to transform our courts so they are fit for the modern age. Under-used courts will be closed, and I can announce today that the money saved will be used to fund a £700 million investment in new technology that will bring further and permanent long-term savings and speed up the process of justice.⁶²

The accompanying HM Treasury’s publication on the November 2015 explained that the Government’s increased investment would “fundamentally transform the courts and tribunals system, ensuring it is fit for purpose and delivers swifter and more certain justice.”⁶³ These reforms were expected to deliver savings of approximately £200 million a year from 2019/20 onwards and would deliver a “more efficient configuration of the estate”.

In November 2016, HMCTS extended the timetable from four to six years in 2016.

5.3 The current reform programme

The Government describes its court reform programme “ambitious”:

⁶⁰ Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice and the Senior President of Tribunals, [Transforming our Justice System](#) September 2016, p6

⁶¹ Judiciary of England and Wales, [Lord Chief Justice’s Report 2014](#), p23

⁶² HC Deb 25 November 2015 c137

⁶³ HM Treasury, [Spending Review and Autumn Statement 2015](#), Cm 9162, November 2015, p69

We are working on an ambitious programme of court reform, which aims to bring new technology and modern ways of working to the way justice is administered.

In collaboration with the senior judiciary and the Ministry of Justice, we are investing £1bn to reform our courts and tribunals system.

Our systems and processes have not kept pace with the world around us. We know we can make justice less confusing, easier to navigate and better at responding to the needs of the public. We want every user to feel they have been treated swiftly, fairly and with respect.

We are building a modern system for administering justice which will benefit everyone who uses it. By designing systems around the public who need and use our services, we can create a more effective system for them and generate efficiencies for the taxpayer.⁶⁴

In May 2018, the National Audit Office reported that HMCTS expects the programme to:

- cost around **£1.15 billion** over its 10-year lifetime;
- generate total benefits of **£1.22 billion** in the 10 years from 2015-6 to 2024-25 from reducing staff (by 5,000 full-time equivalents by 2023) reducing judiciary costs, holding fewer physical hearings and running a smaller estate; and
- deliver annual savings of around **£265 million** after 2023.⁶⁵

The reform programme made up of more than [50 distinct projects](#).⁶⁶

Several online services are up and running. It is now possible, online, to:

- [apply for a divorce](#);
- [make an online claim to a county court for money owed](#);
- [appeal to the tax tribunal](#); and
- [apply for probate](#)

Other projects include:

- Six projects to support digital working in the criminal courts underpinned by the “Common Platform” shared between HMCTS, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service; they include defendants indicating a plea online and improved video hearings leading to remand hearings being done fully by video;
- online initiation and management of Court of Protection cases;
- a review of civil enforcement to increase efficiencies and the “likelihood of successful enforcement”;
- work towards a digital accelerated possession claims process; and
- online initiation and management of public family law and adoption cases

5.4 Are the reforms achievable?

It is not only the Government which regards the reform programme as “ambitious” – there is wide agreement on this. So how achievable are

⁶⁴ HMCTS guidance, [The HMCTS reform programme](#), last updated 6 February 2019

⁶⁵ National Audit Office, [Early progress in transforming courts and tribunal](#), May 2018, p. 4

⁶⁶ HMCTS, [HMCTS reform programme projects explained](#), last updated 11 February 2019

the reforms? The question matters because court closure programme and wider court reform are to some extent mutually dependent:

- The capital receipts, reduced maintenance costs and other efficiency savings from the court closures are an important source of revenue for the court reform programme.
- The success of reforms in boosting efficiency by better use of technology and less reliance on physical attendance in court will be important in enabling the court system to manage with a smaller estate.

The Infrastructure and Projects Authority

The government set up the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) to support and oversee major government projects, including HMCTS Court Reform Project. The IPA provides a "delivery confidence assessments" of projects at a fixed point in time, using a five-point "traffic light" scale. Its most recent Annual Report published in July 2018, is accompanied by "transparency data" for government departments' projects as at September 2017.⁶⁷ These place the HMCTS Court Reform Programme as "amber/red", meaning:

Successful delivery of the project is in doubt, with major risks or issues apparent in a number of key areas. Urgent action is needed to address these problems and/or assess whether resolution is feasible.⁶⁸

The IPA has assessed the HMCTS Reform project as Amber/Red since its inception in 2014, and the Criminal Justice Service Common Platform (which aims to deliver a technology platform which supports business transformation across the Crown Prosecution Service and HMCTS) as amber/red for each year since 2014, except for 2016, when it was assessed as Amber.⁶⁹

The National Audit Office

The NAO found that the changes represented a "very serious challenge":

Delivering the reforms successfully remains extremely challenging, despite HMCTS's work to reduce risk. The revised six-year timescale for the reforms is still shorter than the time taken to complete smaller programmes in other countries.

The NAO found that there had been less progress than expected, expected costs had increased and planned benefits had decreased. Delays in introducing primary legislation created a "significant degree of uncertainty":

The 2017 general election changed the planned legislative timetable, and the timing of the Courts Bill is currently unclear. Some elements of reform, such as the planned extension of virtual hearings, will depend on primary legislation. Without this, HMCTS may have to re-scope elements of the portfolio which is likely to cause delays, increase costs and reduce benefits. It could potentially signal a lack of commitment to the changes which

⁶⁷ IPA, [MOJ Government Major Project Portfolio data, September 2017](#) July 2018

⁶⁸ IPA, [Annual Report on Major Projects 2017-18](#), p. 20

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 25

could weaken support and also increase the dependence on the judiciary as certain changes will need to be enacted through Procedure Rules Committees.

The report recommended that HMCTS should:

- allow enough time to engage with affected parties within the justice system;
- resist pressure to claim savings until planned changes are fully embedded’
- provide greater transparency of its objectives and progress; and
- work with the Ministry of Justice and HM Treasury to address the system-wide consequences of planned changes.⁷⁰

The Public Accounts Committee

The Public Accounts Committee has described it as “hugely ambitious and on a scale which has never been attempted anywhere before”:

HM Courts & Tribunals Service’s £1.2 billion programme to modernise courts is hugely ambitious and on a scale which has never been attempted anywhere before. Transforming the courts and tribunals system in this way will change how people access justice by digitising paper-based services, moving some types of cases online, introducing virtual hearings, closing courts and centralising customer services. Such sweeping changes will be extremely challenging to deliver. The performance of HMCTS to date shows that it has much to learn if it intends to do everything it plans. Despite extending its timetable from four to six years, HMCTS has already fallen behind, delivering only two-thirds of what it expected to at this stage, and it still has not shared a sufficiently well developed plan of what it is trying to achieve.

The pressure to deliver quickly and make savings is limiting HMCTS’s ability to consult meaningfully with stakeholders and risks it driving forward changes before it fully understands the impact on users and the justice system more widely. HMCTS needs to ensure that the savings expected from these reforms are genuine rather than the consequence of shunting costs to other parts of the justice system such as the police, prison service or Crown Prosecution Service, all of which have their own pressures to manage. Without a better grip on these wider issues, there is a significant risk that HCMTS will fail to deliver the benefits it expects.⁷¹

5.5 Legislation during this Parliament

During the 2016-17 Parliamentary session, the Government introduced the *Prison and Courts Bill*. This wide-ranging bill proposed extensive changes to the way the justice system would operate in England and Wales. However it did not complete its Parliamentary stages as Parliament was dissolved for the General Election in 2017.

In the current session, these proposals have (in part) been revived across several smaller, more narrowly drafted, bills. One Act has already been passed in this session in connection with courts and tribunals reform,

⁷⁰ National Audit Office, [Early progress in transforming courts and tribunal](#), May 2018, pp. 5-9

⁷¹ Public Accounts Committee, *Transforming our courts and tribunals*, HC976, 20 July 2018, p. 3

the [*Courts and Tribunals \(Judiciary and Functions of Staff\) Act 2018*](#).

That Act relaxes the rules around the deployment of judges across different courts in England and Wales and across certain tribunals on a UK-wide basis. It also enables more judicial functions to be delegated to court staff, which the Government argues is a necessary efficiency measure to free-up judges to reduce a growing backlog of cases.⁷²

The [*Courts and Tribunals \(Online Procedure\) Bill*](#), was introduced in the House of Lords on 1 May and is currently awaiting its Report Stage. This Bill would create an Online Procedure Rule Committee (OPCR) to make rules for online court and tribunal proceedings. It would be able to decide whether proceedings currently undertaken through a physical court should, in whole or in part, be conducted instead by online means, and if so in what circumstances.⁷³

⁷² For a detailed explanation, see [Commons Library Briefing Paper, *Courts and Tribunals \(Judiciary and Functions of Staff\) Bill \[HL\] 2017-19*](#), 18/8440, 11 December 2018

⁷³ For an overview of the bill, see Lords Library Briefing Paper, [Courts and Tribunals \(Online Procedure\) Bill \[HL\]: Briefing for Lords Stages](#), LLN-2019-0055, 9 May 2019

6. Statistics

6.1 Courts expenditure

Between 2010/11 and 2017/18, the total operating expenditure of the Ministry of Justice fell by 18% in real terms.⁷⁴ The total operating expenditure of HMCTS fell by 22% in real terms.⁷⁵

During the same period, HMCTS's resource expenditure fell by 25% and its capital expenditure by 31%.

Information about the finances of HMCTS is published in its [Annual Report and Accounts \(latest 2017/18\)](#). This contains details of its annual budget and expenditure and also on income received, primarily through fees paid by court users and the sale or leasing/ rental of buildings.

Planned expenditure in the coming year(s) is published in HM Treasury's Main Estimates (the latest is for 2018/19).

The following table shows resource and capital department expenditure limit (DEL) (out-turn), by year and planned spending for 2018/19. Spending fell between 2012/13 and 2015/16 but increased substantially in 2016/17 with an investment of £1 billion in a programme to reform and modernise the courts system.

HMCTS DEPARTMENT EXPENDITURE LIMIT (DEL) AND PLANS				
Financial year	Cash £ million	Real £ million at 2017-18 prices	Annual real terms change £ million	%
Resource DEL				
2010-11	1,092	1,224	.	.
2011-12	1,092	1,208	-16	-1%
2012-13	1,203	1,301	93	8%
2013-14	1,028	1,093	-208	-16%
2014-15	944	989	-104	-9%
2015-16	833	868	-122	-12%
2016-17	1,565	1,594	727	84%
2017/18	1,577	1,577	18	-1%
2018/19 (p)	1,582	1,559	18	-1%
Capital DEL				
2010-11	146	164	.	.
2011-12	27	30	-134	-82%
2012-13	50	54	24	82%
2013-14	0	0	-54	-100%
2014-15	0	0	0	.
2015-16	16	17	1	.
2016-17	131	133	2	708%
2017/18	111	111	0	-17%
2018/19 (p)	227	224	-3	101%

Source: MoJ, *Annual Report 2017-18*; HM Treasury, *Main Estimates 2018-19*; HM Treasury, *GDP Deflators March 2018*; MoJ *Annual report and accounts 2014 to 2015: public expenditure tables*

Notes: Resource DEL including depreciation. Increase in Resource DEL in 2016-17 is due to a reclassification of fee income which was no longer held by HMCTS, increasing net expenditure (but not gross expenditure). (p) indicates planned expenditure.

⁷⁴ Ministry of Justice, *Annual report and accounts, 2011/12 – 2017/18*.

⁷⁵ HMCTS, *Annual report and accounts, 2011/12 – 2017/18*.

6.2 Court caseload

Annual criminal court caseload has been steadily declining since 2010.⁷⁶

- In 2018, magistrates' courts in England and Wales concluded 1.47 million cases and Crown Courts concluded 110,000 cases.
- In 2010, these figures were 2.03 million for magistrates' courts and 154,000 for Crown courts.
- At the end of December 2017, there were 292,000 outstanding cases in magistrates' courts, down from a peak of 327,000 in 2015. The Crown Court had 32,000 outstanding cases at the end of 2017, down from a peak of 55,000 at the end of 2014.
- Criminal court performance has been improving, with an increasing proportion of 'effective' trials at both tiers of criminal court (those that result in a verdict being reached). Magistrates' courts had fewer and a lower proportion of vacated trials in 2017 than five years previously (23,000 in total compared to 46,000).⁷⁷

The caseload of civil courts has risen since 2010, driven by a rise in county courts claims.

- In 2018, county courts received 2.07 million claims, family courts received 262,000, and tribunals received 484,000 cases.⁷⁸
- The equivalent figures for 2010 were 1.5 million at county courts, 264,000 at family courts, and 850,000 at tribunals.⁷⁹

6.3 Court staff and judges

In 2017/18, 15,875 full-time equivalent staff worked at HMCTS, of which 2,034 were contractors or agency staff (13% of the total). This is the highest proportion of contract/agency staff in any of the years for which data is available.⁸⁰

Even taking into account the rise in contract/agency staff, the total number of employees fell by 24% between 2010/11 and 2017/18. The number of Magistrates and Judges also fell during this period. The table below shows the annual number of employees in each category.⁸¹

Between 2010/11 and 2017/18:

- the number of magistrates in post fell by 48%,
- the number of Judges (FTE) fell by 17%,
- the total number of HMCTS employees fell by 24%.

⁷⁶ Ministry of Justice, '[Criminal court statistics](#)'.

⁷⁷ A 'vacated' trial is one which does not go ahead on the date that it is scheduled for and which will be rescheduled.

⁷⁸ MoJ, '[Civil justice statistics quarterly](#)'; '[Tribunals and gender recognition certificate statistics quarterly](#)'. The tribunals total is for 2017/18.

⁷⁹ The family courts figure is for 2011, since 2010 figures are not available.

⁸⁰ HM Courts & Tribunals Service, '[Annual report and accounts 2017/18](#)' (2018)

⁸¹ Note that Magistrates are volunteers rather than employees.

Note that the overall caseload of HMCTS rose by around 4% between 2012/13 and 2017/18, driven by a rise in cases at magistrates' and county courts.⁸²

MAGISTRATES, JUDGES, AND STAFF AT HMCTS			
Annual average, England and Wales			
	Magistrates	Judges	HMCTS total staff
2010/11	29,270	3,598	20,777
2011/12	25,155	3,694	19,704
2012/13	23,401	3,621	18,269
2013/14	21,626	3,452	17,829
2014/15	19,634	3,238	17,033
2015/16	17,552	3,202	16,286
2016/17	16,129	3,134	15,749
2017/18	15,003	2,978	15,875

Source: HM Courts and Tribunals Service *Annual Report and Accounts*, various years; Courts and Tribunals Judiciary *Judicial diversity statistics*, various years

Notes: a) HMCTS permanent staff includes contract/ agency staff.
 b) Magistrates do not generally work full time so the number shown here is overall number in post, rather than full-time equivalent (FTE). For other categories, FTE is shown.

6.4 Magistrates' court closures by constituency

The House of Commons Library has an online dashboard which allows you to view Magistrates' court closures by constituency. It also includes a map of the constituency showing the distance from each local area to the nearest Magistrates' court in 2010 and in 2019, after the latest wave of closures.

The tool can be found here: [Constituency data: Magistrates' court closures](#).

⁸² This is calculated using the number of cases received during the financial years 2012/13 and 2017/18 (MoJ [Civil justice statistics quarterly](#), [Criminal court statistics quarterly](#), and [Tribunals and gender recognition statistics quarterly](#)). The equivalent total for earlier years is not available.

7. List of court closures

COURT CLOSURES SINCE 2010: FULL LIST		
Closed court	Date of closure	Proceeds of sale (£)
Wantage Magistrates' Court	2010/11	£657,000
Aberdare County Court	2011/12	No information
Aberdare Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£275,000
Abertillery Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£81,000
Acton Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£1,176,665
Alnwick Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£20,000
Amersham Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Ammanford Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£90,000
Ashford County Court	2011/12	No information
Ashford Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£375,000
Balham Youth Court	2011/12	£2,000,000
Barking & Dagenham Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Barry Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£250,000
Batley & Dewsbury Magistrates' Court (FPC)	2011/12	No information
Bingley (Keighley) Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Bishop Auckland County Court	2011/12	No information
Bishop Auckland Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£150,000
Blandford Forum Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£175,000
Blaydon Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£144,990
Brentford Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£650,000
Bridgwater Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£167,652
Camborne Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£137,500
Cardigan Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£48,910
Cheltenham County Court	2011/12	No information
Chepstow County Court	2011/12	No information
Chepstow Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Chorley County Court	2011/12	No information
Cirencester Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£450,000
Coalville Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£245,000
Coleford Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£170,000
Consett County Court	2011/12	£81,265
Cromer Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£325,000
Daventry Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£140,000
Dewsbury County Court	2011/12	£276,000
Didcot Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£400,000
Ely Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£1
Epping Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£750,000
Epsom County Court	2011/12	No information
Epsom Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Evesham County Court	2011/12	No information
Flint Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£87,500
Frome Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£397,666
Goole County Court	2011/12	No information
Goole Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£60,000
Gosforth Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£378,000

Grantham County Court	2011/12	No information
Grantham Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£560,000
Gravesend County Court	2011/12	£100,000
Grays Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Guisborough (East Langbaurgh) Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Halesowen Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£314,250
Harlow County Court	2011/12	No information
Harrow Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£1,125,000
Haywards Heath County Court	2011/12	No information
Hemel Hempstead Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£650,000
Hitchin County Court	2011/12	No information
Honiton Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£183,000
Houghton-Le-Spring Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Huntingdon County Court	2011/12	No information
Ilford County Court	2011/12	£1,313,013
Ilkeston Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£610,000
Keighley County Court	2011/12	£130,000
Kidderminster County Court	2011/12	No information
Kingston-upon-Thames Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Knowsley Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£250,000
Lewes Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£1,900,000
Liskeard Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£380,000
Llandovery Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Llangefni Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Llwynypia Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Lowestoft County Court (FPC)	2011/12	No information
Lowestoft Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£150,000
Ludlow County Court	2011/12	No information
Ludlow Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Lyndhurst Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Market Drayton Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£100,000
Market Harborough Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£291,500
Melton Mowbray County Court	2011/12	No information
Melton Mowbray Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£147,000
Mid-Sussex (Haywards Heath) Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Newark County Court	2011/12	No information
Newark Magistrates' Court (FPC)	2011/12	No information
Newbury County Court	2011/12	No information
Northwich County Court (same building as Mags)	2011/12	No information
Northwich Magistrates' Court (FPC) (same as County)	2011/12	No information
Oswestry County Court	2011/12	No information
Oswestry Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Penrith County Court (same building as Mags)	2011/12	No information
Penrith Magistrates' Court (same building a County)	2011/12	No information
Penzance County Court	2011/12	£230,000
Penzance Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information

Pontypool County Court	2011/12	£200,000
Poole County Court	2011/12	No information
Pwllheli Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£131,013
Rawtenstall County Court	2011/12	No information
Rawtenstall Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£135,000
Redditch County Court	2011/12	£345,000
Retford Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£151,000
Rochdale Magistrates' Court (FPC)	2011/12	No information
Rugby County Court	2011/12	No information
Rugby Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Salford County Court	2011/12	No information
Salford Magistrates' Court (FPC)	2011/12	No information
Shrewsbury County Court	2011/12	No information
Shrewsbury Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Sittingbourne Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£430,000
Skegness County Court	2011/12	No information
Southport (North Sefton) Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Southport County Court	2011/12	No information
Stourbridge County Court	2011/12	No information
Stratford Upon Avon County Court	2011/12	No information
Sudbury Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£112,000
Sutton Coldfield Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£440,000
Sutton Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£2,247,000
Swaffham Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£155,000
Tamworth County Court	2011/12	No information
Tamworth Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£437,500
Thetford Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£231,550
Totnes Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£237,000
Towcester Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£50,000
Tynedale (Hexham) Magistrates' Court (FPC)	2011/12	No information
Wellingborough County Court	2011/12	No information
West Bromwich Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£160,000
Whitehaven County Court	2011/12	No information
Whitehaven Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£200,000
Wimborne Magistrates' Court	2011/12	No information
Wisbech Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£151,350
Witney Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£330,000
Woking Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£1,050,000
Woolwich Magistrates' Court	2011/12	£335,000
Worksop County Court	2011/12	£151,335
Burton Upon Trent County Court	2012/13	£185,000
Haringey Magistrates' Court	2012/13	£10,100,000
Pontefract County Court	2012/13	No information
Pontefract Magistrates' Court (FPC)	2012/13	£205,000
Selby Magistrates' Court	2012/13	£200,000
Stoke on Trent Magistrates' Court	2012/13	£186,000
Trowbridge County Court	2012/13	No information
Abergavenny Magistrates' Court	2013/14	£460,000
Andover Magistrates' Court	2013/14	£537,500
Bury St Edmunds Tribunal	2013/14	No information
Denbigh Magistrates' Court	2013/14	£165,000

Newcastle Tribunal - Quayside House	2013/14	No information
North Liverpool Community Justice Centre	2013/14	No information
Tower Bridge Magistrates' Court	2013/14	£8,525,000
Alton Magistrates' Court	2014/15	No information
Bracknell Magistrates' Court	2014/15	£1,000,001
Knutsford Crown Court	2014/15	£1,600,000
Neath Magistrates' Court	2014/15	£450,000
Spalding Magistrates' Court	2014/15	£270,430
Accrington County Court	2015/16	No information
Accrington Magistrates' Court	2015/16	No information
Aldershot & Farnham County Court	2015/16	No information
Arcade Chambers - Aldershot Tribunal	2015/16	No information
Basildon Acorn House - Basildon Tribunal	2015/16	No information
Cambridge RPTS Tribunal	2015/16	No information
Cambridge Tribunal - Eastbrook House	2015/16	No information
Chesterfield County Court	2015/16	No information
Chesterfield St Marys Court - Chesterfield Tribunal	2015/16	No information
Doncaster Tribunal - Portland Place	2015/16	No information
Epsom Tribunal	2015/16	No information
Harrogate County Court	2015/16	No information
Hereford County Court	2015/16	No information
Norwich Tribunal - Elliot House	2015/16	No information
Richmond upon Thames Magistrates' Court	2015/16	£9,838,000
Solihull Magistrates' Court	2015/16	£4,312,000
The Crescent Centre - Bristol Tribunal	2015/16	No information
Waltham Forest Magistrates' Court	2015/16	£3,471,040
Worksop Magistrates' Court	2015/16	£115,000
Aylesbury Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court	2016/17	No information
Barnstaple Crown Court	2016/17	No information
Bolton County Court and Family Court	2016/17	No information
Bournemouth Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£1,920,299
Bow County Court	2016/17	£3,500,000
Brecon Law Courts	2016/17	No information
Bridgend Law Courts	2016/17	£375,000
Burton upon Trent Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£240,000
Bury St Edmunds Crown & Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£1,050,000
Buxton Magistrates' & County Court	2016/17	No information
Caerphilly Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£445,000
Carmarthen Law Courts (The Guildhall)	2016/17	£223,004
Cheltenham Rivershill House Tribunal	2016/17	No information
Consett Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£225,000
Corby Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£140,000
Dartford Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£1,000,000
Dolgellau Crown & Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£67,509
Doncaster County Court	2016/17	No information
Dorchester Crown Court (Weymouth & Dorchester Combined)	2016/17	No information
Durham Elvet House - Durham Tribunal	2016/17	No information
East Parade - Sheffield Tribunal	2016/17	No information

Eastbourne Magistrates', County Court and Family Court	2016/17	£805,000
Fareham Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£1,150,000
Feltham Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£2,150,000
Gloucester Magistrates' Court	2016/17	No information
Greenwich Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£12,005,000
Halifax County and Family Court	2016/17	£200,000
Halifax Magistrates' Court (Calderdale)	2016/17	£550,000
Hammersmith Magistrates' and County Court (County Court Only)	2016/17	£43,000,000
Hartlepool Magistrates' & County Court	2016/17	No information
Hinckley Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£800,000
Holyhead Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£112,500
Kendal Magistrates' Court and County Court	2016/17	£720,000
Kettering County Court	2016/17	£200,000
Kettering Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£187,500
King's Lynn County Court	2016/17	No information
Llangefni Civil and Family Court	2016/17	£72,000
Macclesfield County Court	2016/17	No information
Macclesfield Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£385,000
Middlesbrough Centre North East - Middlesbrough Tribunal	2016/17	No information
Morpeth & Berwick County Court and Family Court	2016/17	No information
Neath and Port Talbot Civil and Family Court	2016/17	£250,000
Oldham County Court and Family Court	2016/17	No information
Oldham Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£650,000
Ormskirk Magistrates' Court and Family Court	2016/17	£250,000
Pocock Street Tribunals Hearing Centre	2016/17	No information
Pontypridd Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£350,000
Prestatyn Magistrates' Court	2016/17	No information
Redhill Magistrates' Court and Family Court and Reigate County Court and Family Court	2016/17	£6,550,000
Rhyl County Court	2016/17	£92,150
Rotherham Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court	2016/17	£1
Runcorn (Halton) Magistrates' Court	2016/17	No information
Runcorn County Court	2016/17	No information
Sandwell Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£530,000
Scunthorpe Magistrates' Court, County Court and Family Court	2016/17	No information
Skegness Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£150,000
Southampton Barrack Block	2016/17	No information
St Albans County Court	2016/17	No information
St Helens Magistrates' Court	2016/17	No information
Staffordshire Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£435,000
Stroud Magistrates' Court	2016/17	No information
Swansea Crown Court (Guildhall)	2016/17	No information

Tameside Magistrates' & County Court (County Part Only)	2016/17	No information
Taunton Blackdown House - Taunton Tribunal	2016/17	No information
Torquay Magistrates' Court	2016/17	No information
Trafford Magistrates' Court & Altrincham County Court	2016/17	£3,235,000
Tunbridge Wells County Court and Family Court	2016/17	No information
Wakefield & Pontefract Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£360,000
Warrington Combined Court (County Part Only)	2016/17	No information
Warrington Magistrates' Court	2016/17	No information
Watford Magistrates' Court	2016/17	£3,836,000
West Berkshire Magistrates' Court (Newbury)	2016/17	£1,000,000
Weymouth & Dorchester Combined Court Offices (Westwey House)	2016/17	No information
Wrexham Rhyd Broughton (Tribunal)	2016/17	No information
Yate Magistrates' Court (North Avon)	2016/17	£1,350,000
Yeovil County Court	2016/17	No information
Bury Magistrates' Court and County Court	2017/18	£400,000
Chichester Magistrates' Court	2017/18	No information
Chippenham Magistrates' Court, Civil Court and Family Court	2017/18	No information
Dover Magistrates' Court	2017/18	£350,000
Lambeth County Court	2017/18	No information
Tottenham Magistrates' Court	2017/18	£4,570,000
Woolwich County Court	2017/18	£2,555,000
Banbury County Court	2018/19	No information
Banbury Magistrates' Court	2018/19	No information
Bicester Magistrates' Court and Family Court	2018/19	£1,270,000
Blackfriars Crown Court	2018/19	No information
Chorley Magistrates' Court	2018/19	No information
East Berkshire Magistrates' Court, Maidenhead	2018/19	No information
Fleetwood Magistrates' Court	2018/19	No information
Northallerton Magistrates' Court	2018/19	No information
Wandsworth County Court	2018/19	No information
Wandsworth Family Court	2018/19	No information

Source: HC147811, 24 May 2018; List of courts closed in 2017/18 supplied to HoC Library by Ministry of Justice; HC127599, 08 February 2018; HC228777, HC228771-228777, 13 March 2019

Note: This is a list of closures of court buildings or court facilities within multi-purpose buildings. When a court closes, its services and caseload are reallocated to a different court. In some cases the receiving court will be in the same constituency, meaning that the constituency has not lost the presence of a court service.

8. Press and journal articles

Please note: The Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

Owen Bowcott, [*Prison review says family contact reduces reoffending by women; Report finds that inmates who receive family visits are 39% less likely to break law again*](#), The Guardian, 18 June 2019

Michael Cross, [*Model for online court moves in to RTA claims*](#), Law Gazette, 17 June 2019

Monidipa Fouzder, [*Court closures: travel benchmark 'discriminates against disabled people'*](#), Law Gazette, 11 June 2019

Monidipa Fouzder, [*Writing on the wall: call for moratorium on court closures*](#), Law Gazette, 17 May 2019

Monidipa Fouzder, [*HMCTS reforms 'focus too much on court closures'*](#), Law Gazette, 5 April 2019

Afua Hirsch, [*When courts are closed in numbers like this, people are denied justice: Some people face a three-hour trip to have their case heard. Others have no legal representation. Even judges are calling it 'hell'*](#), The Guardian, 30 January 2019

Lizzie Dearden, [*Half of magistrates' courts in England and Wales closed since 2010 amid justice 'crisis'; Government says people will have 'reasonable access to alternative courts'*](#), The Independent, 28 January 2019

Owen Bowcott and Pamela Duncan, [*Half of magistrates courts in England and Wales closed since 2010; Defendants, witnesses, police, lawyers and JPs left having to travel huge distances to court*](#), The Guardian, 27 January 2019

Owen Bowcott, [*Courts IT chaos prompts call for compensation and more funding; Justice minister apologises for week of disruption as cuts to services are blamed for computer meltdown*](#), The Guardian, 23 January 2019

Owen Bowcott, [*Online pleas and AI for judges: minister reveals UK law reform plans; Lucy Frazer believes people will embrace digital justice as they have online dating*](#), The Guardian, 3 December 2018

Hayden Smith, [*Rules of compensation for victims of crime must be reviewed, orders justice secretary; Controversial bar on financial awards to victims if they lived in the same home as their attacker before 1979 will also be abolished*](#), The Independent, 9 September 2018

Jamie Grierson, [*Access to justice in family courts 'inadequate', says outgoing head; Sir James Munby said cuts to legal aid had left many people without representation and struggling to navigate system*](#), The Guardian, 27 July 2018

John Hyde, [*Put court closures on hold, say solicitors and magistrates*](#), Law Gazette, 4 April 2018

John Hyde, [*MPs lament 'chaotic' aftermath of court closures*](#), Law Gazette, 7 March 2018

9. Parliamentary material

9.1 Written statements

[Publication of the response to the 'Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate' consultation and the Court & Tribunal Design Guide](#)

HCWS1554, 13 May 2019

Mr David Gauke (The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice): [HMCTS Update](#)

HCWS920, 24 Jul 2018

Mr David Gauke (The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice):

[Her Majesty's Courts & Tribunals Service](#)

HCWS412, 18 Jan 2018

Lucy Frazer (The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice): [Deposited Paper DEP2018-0033](#), 18 Jan 2018

9.2 Oral questions

[Access to Justice: Court Staffing and Closures](#)

HC Deb 12 Mar 2019 cc177-178

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on access to justice of recent (a) changes in court staffing and (b) court closures. [909725]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I would like to assure the hon. Lady that any decision to close a court is not taken lightly, but in circumstances where 41% of our courts operated in 2016-17 at half their available capacity and where we are investing £1 billion in courts and bringing them up to date, the Ministry of Justice has to think carefully about where our court resources are most effectively and efficiently spent.

Thelma Walker: I thank the Minister for her response. However, the recent closure of courts in West Yorkshire is putting additional pressure on those that remain, causing backlogs and delays. The Hands off HRI campaign, which is fighting to save services at our local hospital, Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, is waiting for a consent order that is with Leeds Crown court. However, the backlog of several weeks means that the campaign is undergoing a lengthy period of uncertainty, as are those involved in many other cases. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that cuts to staffing and closures are not damaging my constituents' access to justice?

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned, when we undertake court closures—they are undertaken very carefully, and the Lord Chancellor does not undertake these decisions lightly—we look at court utilisation rates, and the courts that are closed are often those that are not performing in terms of capacity. On the case the hon. Lady refers to, I am happy to take it up with her and to look at any backlog or delay.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): The Government have been forced to announce a one-year delay to their £1 billion court reform programme. Many people are concerned that this programme is simply a smokescreen for sacking staff and closing courts. Will the Government take this opportunity to have a public debate about the issue and to allow Parliament to debate and scrutinise these changes?

Our court reform programme is one of the most ambitious in the world. We recently held a seminar at which at least 20 other countries were represented. They talked about their reform programmes, and none of them was as ambitious as ours in streamlining, making more effective and modernising the court process. The delay in the programme is to ensure that we can efficiently and effectively manage the programme going forward.

Court Closures and Staffing

HC Deb 5 Feb 2019 cc155-156

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect of recent (a) changes in court staffing and (b) court closures on access to justice.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I assure the hon. Lady that any decision to close a court is taken incredibly carefully, but in circumstances in which 41% of courts were operating at half their available capacity in 2016-17, it is right that the Ministry of Justice considers how best to spend its resources. We are investing £1 billion in our courts, bringing them up to date, improving back-office systems and making it easier for people to access justice.

Helen Hayes: Three years ago, I expressed concerns about the impact that the closure of Lambeth county court would have on the efficiency of the court system and access to justice for my constituents. Lambeth was closed two years ago and the workload was moved to Clerkenwell and Shoreditch. Yesterday, I heard from a local legal aid solicitor that Clerkenwell and Shoreditch county court is completely overwhelmed, that delays of six to eight months to receive court directions are common, and that the contact centre cannot provide up-to-date information on cases. When will the Government act to sort out this shambolic mess?

Lucy Frazer: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that specific situation. The MOJ is taking a number of steps to improve court timeliness, which is of course important. We are digitalising a number of services—people can now track their tribunal appeal online—and

recruiting more judges to tribunals, with more than 225 recruited over the past year. I am happy to discuss that particular case.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Under the smokescreen of a digital revolution, the Government have taken the axe to our court system. A victim of crime who wants justice through their day in court will now have a much more difficult experience, perhaps having to travel much further after the closure of hundreds of courts, and perhaps finding that the help and support they need are lacking after the sacking of thousands of court staff. Given the recent chaos, instead of forcing through yet more court reforms, will the Minister agree to a moratorium on further cuts and closures, at least until this House has been offered a chance to scrutinise changes that will affect access to justice for decades to come?

The hon. Gentleman is right to identify the fact that an IT issue affected courts towards the end of January. That disruption was caused by an infrastructure issue in our supplier's data and I apologise for any issues for people who were affected. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have consulted on what principles will guide any future court closures, and that consultation has now come to an end.

Family and Magistrates Courts: Closures

HC Deb 12 Nov 2018 cc173-175

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effect on (a) costs borne by partners, (b) magistracy diversity and (c) access to justice of the closure of family and magistrates courts. [907518]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): Whenever we close courts, there is of course always a public consultation, and we always carefully consider the consequences of any closure. However, in circumstances where, in 2016-17, 41% of our courts and tribunals used less than half of their available hearing capacity; where any money from the proceeds of sale is reinvested back into the Courts Service; and where we are reforming our courts with technology and bringing them up to date, we have to ask ourselves whether spending money on physical buildings is always the best use of money in our legal justice system.

Nic Dakin: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will she commit to doing an evaluation of the impact that the closure of Scunthorpe magistrates court and family court will have on the costs of other services and the diversity of the magistracy sitting in Humberside?

Lucy Frazer: I am very interested in considering whether it is appropriate to do that in relation to a particular court. In general terms, it is interesting that although we have closed courts since 2012, the magistracy has diversified slightly, so we still have more women and more black and minority ethnic magistrates than we did in 2012. In relation to the wider justice system and other agencies, I am pleased to have visited recently a police station in Lewisham and a prison in

Durham to see how our agencies can work better together, using technology as we progress into the next stage of justice.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Like Scunthorpe, there are reports that Grimsby magistrates court, which serves the Cleethorpes area, is under threat of closure, with the possibility of cases being transferred to Hull, which is a round trip of 66 miles. Will the Minister give an absolute assurance that Grimsby is not under threat?

Lucy Frazer: There is a consultation in relation to remand hearings at the moment, but I am happy to confirm that we are not considering closing Grimsby court.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab):

The Conservative decision to cut 2,500 court staff has caused delays for victims and deterioration in the functioning of our courts, but that is just the start; the Conservatives plan to cut many more thousands of court staff in the next few years. Will the Minister commit today to halting those court staff cuts until this House has debated properly the court reform programme, which, to many, looks like a smokescreen for more austerity and which is being driven through without proper debate in this House and with the public?

Lucy Frazer: In the justice system, we are reforming the courts. We are investing £1 billion in that process. That is not austerity. On staff, we are modernising and bringing in technology to make our systems work more effectively. That is in the interests of victims, witnesses and defendants. We are making our court processes much more effective. There are some reductions in staff as a result of that, but we are increasing access to justice.

9.3 Early Day Motion

[Court Closures across the UK](#)

EDM 839, 22 Jan 2018

Mary Glendon: That this House is deeply concerned by the Government's proposal to close nine further courts across the UK, displacing over 130 members of staff; notes that these proposals come at a time when staff morale has been damaged by previous closures, job cuts, pay restraint and privatisation threats; believes that these proposals would result in delays to cases being heard and members of the public having to travel further and for longer to access justice; further believes that the underuse of courts is primarily caused by legal aid cuts, increased court fees and a shortage of staff and judges; insists that unproven and unreliable digital processes such as virtual hearings should not be imposed on courts without a full evaluation of the impact on evidence quality and perception; and calls on the Government to halt these closures, consult relevant unions and review the entire courts closure programme.

10. Further reading

Rt Hon Sir Brian Leveson, [Review of Efficiency in Criminal Proceedings](#) [pdf], January 2015

Lord Justice Briggs, [Civil Courts Structure Review: Interim Report](#) [pdf], December 2016

Lord Justice Briggs, [Civil Courts Structure Review: Final Report](#) [pdf], July 2016

Ministry of Justice, [Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate](#) [pdf] 18 January 2018

Ministry of Justice, [Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate: Consultation response document](#), 17 May 2019

Response to the consultation: 'Fit for the future: transforming the Court and Tribunal Estate' consultation:

- the background to the report
- a summary of the responses to the report
- a detailed response to the specific questions raised in the report
- the next steps following this consultation

Lord Chancellor, Lord Chief Justice, and the Senior President of Tribunals [Transforming our justice system](#), September 2016

National Audit Office, [Early progress in transforming courts and tribunal](#), May 2018

Public Accounts Committee, [Transforming our courts and tribunals](#), HC976, 20 July 2018

Nicola Padfield, *Even more court closures*, *Criminal Law Review* 2018 *Crim. L.R.* 2018, 5, 351-353

Criticises Government proposals for further court closures. Highlights concerns raised by the Justice Committee of the House of Commons, and suggests the economic principle of value for money is taking precedence over access to justice. Notes additional Justice Committee concerns that the increased use of virtual and online justice is disadvantaging groups including unrepresented, older and younger defendants, and its call for further evaluation.

Nicola Padfield, *Yet more court closures*, *Criminal Law Review* 2015 *Crim. L.R.* 2015, 11, 843-844

Abstract: Reflects on the Government's July 2015 publication "Proposals on the Provision of Court and Tribunal Estate in England and Wales", and argues that it fails to provide convincing grounds for closing one fifth of the UK's courts and tribunals, or to discuss the impact of the closures on respect for justice. Suggests ways in which courts could be better used and considers whether greater efforts should be made to encourage people to visit them.

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