

Consultation on proposals for the rationalisation of the court estate

serving the community through the administration of justice

Document Details

Date issued:

29/01/2015

Document Authors:

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) is consulting on proposals to rationalise the current court estate and close a number of court buildings.
- 1.2 As an organisation NICTS has always been and remains committed to the pursuit of continuous improvement and has established a Modernisation Programme (see paragraph 1.12 below). In recent years NICTS has sought to adapt to the changing circumstances within which all public sector organisations must operate. The pace of change required as a result of in-year budget reductions, has to an extent limited our ability to plan effectively for the future. In response and in the context of greater clarity about the scale of the financial challenges we will face over the coming years NICTS is strategically seeking through our Modernisation Programme to ensure we make the best use of the resources that will be available to us.
- 1.3 NICTS has been required to make difficult choices and it is clear that further complex and challenging decisions lie ahead. No-one wants to see service delivery reduce, but equally it must be recognised that funding reductions of the scale we are facing within the timescale we are facing them cannot not be achieved without some adverse impact. It is right that public sector organisations, whatever the circumstances, should always seek to deliver the best possible service. For NICTS, we believe that in order to do so we will have to operate in a very different way.
- 1.4 The proposals for court closures contained in this document will if implemented have a significant impact on some court users. The priority for us therefore must be to ensure, as far as reasonably possible, we mitigate the impact of reducing the court estate by seeking to enhance processes, practices and procedures. While NICTS recognise that to do so will be a challenging task, it is one to which we are committed. In making these proposals NICTS also acknowledge the need, when it is possible, for further investment aimed at developing and enhancing the court estate.

- 1.5 An initial pre-consultation equality screening exercise indicates that the proposals would have an impact on a small number of Section 75 categories. However we do acknowledge that the impact of court closures may be felt by a wide range of court users, we will therefore keep the need for an equality impact assessment under review during the consultation process. The proposals have also been considered in the context of the Justice Minister's objective of delivering "faster, fairer justice." NICTS will therefore seek to ensure that the implementation of any changes as a result of this consultation do not detract from achieving that objective.
- 1.6 Your views on the consultation are welcome and will provide the opportunity to inform our decisions on the proposals for the future court estate.

Background

- 1.7 In common with other public sector organisations, the Department of Justice has seen very significant budget reductions during the current financial year. These reductions have had, and will continue to have, a significant adverse impact upon the entire justice system, including NICTS. In summary, during the 2014/15 financial year the NICTS budget has been reduced by £2.7m. This has resulted in a number of significant developments including a reduction of 42.7 posts and the temporary closure of the Old Townhall Building.
- 1.8 The publication of the Executive's draft budget for 2015/16 provides an insight into the scale of reductions facing each Department in the next financial year and beyond. In publishing a draft budget for the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Minister has indicated that in allocating resource budgets his priorities are to:
- Protect frontline policing as far as possible;
 - Ensure the PSNI has adequate additional security funding; and
 - Protect other frontline areas across the Department as far as possible, with the aim of protecting outcomes for the public.
- 1.9 Although final figures have yet to be agreed, the DOJ draft budget proposes that the core DOJ will face budget reductions of over 20% on the opening 2014/15

position in order to offer some protection to frontline organisations such as NICTS. In this context the draft budget is expected to reflect that NICTS allocation will be reduced by £4.4m on the initial 2014/15 position (a reduction of 10.8%). Additionally NICTS will need to fund our own inflationary pressures. This means that in addition to the recurrent savings delivered in 2014/15 we need to find around £3m further savings if we are to live within our 2015/16 anticipated allocation. In addition to the position set out above NICTS would expect to have a number of other significant unfunded pressures during the year. Budget allocations beyond the 2015/16 year are expected to be equally, if not more, challenging.

- 1.10 It is for this reason that the Stormont House Agreement indicates that the Executive will adopt, in January 2015, a comprehensive programme of Public Sector Reform and Restructuring aimed at achieving the scale of savings required if Departments are to live within their budgets during 2015/16 and beyond. The programme will include a number of elements including a Northern Ireland Civil Service Voluntary Exit Scheme and the development of Departmental specific reform plans to deliver savings.
- 1.11 In this context NICTS has established a Modernisation Programme to look strategically at how best we can position the organisation for the challenges we will face over the next 3 to 5 years. The objective of the Programme will be “*to ensure NICTS is structured and resourced to provide efficient and effective service delivery to users; and to have a workforce that is equipped to work in a new and increasingly challenging environment.*”
- 1.12 The Programme will run for up to two years and will initially consist of five projects. The projects are as follows:
 - NICTS Service Delivery;
This project will examine the current operating model of the NICTS, including processes, practices and resources; with a view to establishing integrated services and support for courts and tribunal users; and ensure the organisational structure is fit for purpose.

➤ Rationalisation of the NICTS Estate;

This project is responsible for maximising the potential of the NICTS estate, in order to deliver efficiencies in the running costs and to ensure the estate is able to support the future vision for NICTS.

➤ Income Generation – Funding Model;

This project will examine the current funding arrangements for each business area with a view to establishing models to ensure full cost recovery, where applicable; and a fundamental review of civil fees.

➤ Courts Funds Office Reform;

This project is responsible for modernising the Courts Funds Office in terms of its IT system, legislation, scrutiny and governance of investment policies and strategies, service standards, information to customers and charging model.

➤ Workforce Planning

This project will focus on the workforce of NICTS to ensure it is equipped to work in the new and increasingly challenging environment.

1.13 The purpose of this consultation is to inform the Court Rationalisation Project by seeking the views of the public on a series of proposals and options to rationalise the court estate. The estate makes up a considerable proportion of the NICTS baseline and it is not feasible to deliver year on year savings of the magnitude required without carefully considering our options for consolidation. Neighbouring jurisdictions have already faced the challenge of significantly reducing their court estates. England and Wales has closed 149 courts since 2010, Scotland has closed 17 courts since 2013 and the Republic of Ireland has closed 26 courts since 2012.

1.14 In considering how we should proceed, NICTS has looked at all of the buildings we own to examine how to retain those courthouses which offer the best possible options for meeting business demands and reducing the impact of any closures on court users, our partners and the judiciary. In broad terms we are seeking to make greater use of our more recently built courthouses, which will offer a better

standard of accommodation and facilities, and those older buildings with a larger number of courtrooms, which have greater capacity to accommodate the different types of court business. In developing our proposals NICTS has also been mindful of the need to work closely with the Department of Justice as it develops an Estates Strategy aimed at assessing the future accommodation needs of the Department and its Agencies.

- 1.15 NICTS has made significant investment in the way that it delivers its court office services and the first choice of those who have administrative business to conduct should be the use of technology: electronic communication, web-based systems and telephone rather than attendance at a court building.

- 1.16 However, NICTS recognises that any proposals to close courthouses give rise to concerns for court users, in particular around access to justice and delay. Some people will have to travel further to get to court. This may have a particular impact on those who rely on public transport. Stakeholders have previously indicated that court closures can impact on those vulnerable people who require urgent access to courts e.g. victims of domestic violence who want to apply for protective court orders. It may be possible to mitigate the impact to some extent (e.g. through the flexibility of the new single jurisdiction provisions which will enable cases to be listed at an alternative venue to better suit parties). It is however important to acknowledge that notwithstanding the steps we will take to mitigate the impact, there will be adverse consequences as a result of court closures.

- 1.17 From previous court user surveys we know that only a small minority of those attending court use public transport – 4.7% used buses and 1.4% used trains. Nonetheless, in assessing the options for transferring business, the availability of public transport has been an important consideration. We have sought to ensure that the journey time by public transport from the current to the alternative court venue should not, as far as possible, exceed 60 minutes and that people will be able to arrive at the start of the case in which they are concerned and be able to return home by public transport each day.

- 1.18 In some areas we present an option for Specialist Court Centres i.e. court venues which will deal only with criminal or civil and family business. Under the specialist court arrangements, the maximum travel time may exceed the 60 minute target but we welcome views from consultees whether this might be acceptable given the wider benefits that such specialist centres offer in terms of the separation of different types of business and capacity to deliver improved services and facilities at a dedicated location.
- 1.19 We have listened to the judicial views which would indicate broad support for the Special Court Centres proposition which offers the potential to improve consistency and quality of decision making. As in other professions which operate on a specialism basis, regional specialist court judges would be able to build their knowledge and skills by working together and sharing learning experiences on a more consistent basis.
- 1.20 There would potentially be better throughput of cases and greater efficiency, with the flexibility of listing more cases that could be shared across the available pool of judiciary on any given day.
- 1.21 While financial pressures are undoubtedly one of the key drivers, in the context of the NICTS Modernisation Programme we believe that the proposals to reduce the size of the court estate also offer a number of benefits for court users.
- As mentioned above the co-location of judges dealing with a particular type of business offers greater scope for the judges to work collaboratively and deal more effectively with the cases before them e.g. if two judges are dealing with civil bill cases there is the opportunity to transfer if one judge becomes free to hear a pending case in the other judge's list;
 - In the context of a reducing capital budget, a smaller number of court venues would allow us to better target our limited resources to ensure essential maintenance work and deliver improvements to accommodation and facilities. (NICTS anticipate that we will only receive £1.2m in capital for 2015/16 - 32% of the capital bid submitted).

1.22 NICTS is aware of both the real and symbolic value of courts within local communities and has approached this challenge mindful of the strength of feeling potential closures will generate. However, as a public body we have a responsibility to fully maximise the use of our resources. Continuing to operate 20 courthouses in an area the size of Northern Ireland is simply not sustainable in the current financial environment. We are satisfied however that the proposals in this paper still afford an accessible and flexible model for justice administration as we look ahead.

Court rationalisation proposals

1.23 The consultation paper sets out proposals to introduce a new configuration of court boundaries which will divide Northern Ireland administratively into three Administrative Court Divisions rather than the current seven statutory Divisions. For ease of reference we have named these Divisions:

- North Eastern;
- South Eastern; and
- Western.

1.24 Under this model each of the Divisions is larger than those which currently exist, but it will continue to be the case that where there are a number of court venues within a Division capable of dealing with different case types, these will generally be listed at the nearest appropriate venue to minimise the travel impact for court users, in particular those reliant on public transport.

1.25 In order to identify potential options for closure, we evaluated each of our existing courthouses in terms of their location, physical features, potential to cope with more and different types of court sittings, accessibility, potential for re-sale or re-use and the business volumes at the venue over the past four years. We considered some of these factors to hold greater importance, for example volume of business and travelling distance to the nearest alternative court. These criteria were weighted accordingly.

1.26 We have also sought to incorporate any transferred business at alternative court venues with no reduction in the number of sittings where possible and ensuring the transferred business is listed in suitable courtroom accommodation. Insofar

as it is practicable to do so, youth court and family court business should have some level of separation from other adult criminal court business.

1.27 The resulting list of potential venues for closure was examined against other factors such as whether existing business could be accommodated in another venue, a financial assessment of where most savings could be made and whether the options available could work within the proposed court boundaries.

1.28 In the new North Eastern Division we are proposing that the Old Townhall Building would be reopened to accommodate the permanent closure of **Lisburn and Newtownards Courthouses**. The Old Townhall Building would be used primarily as a specialist family court centre with all other business being accommodated within Laganside Courts. We are also proposing the closure of **Ballymena Courthouse** and transfer of business to Antrim Courthouse. We will proceed with the previously announced closure of Limavady Courthouse and transfer of all business to Coleraine Courthouse.

1.29 In the new South Eastern Division we are proposing the closure of **Armagh Courthouse** but we are seeking views on two options for the distribution of business.

(a) Specialist Court Centres – Under this model Craigavon will become the main Civil, Family, Youth and Tribunals Centre for the Division and Newry will be the main Criminal Court Centre.

(b) Traditional model – All Armagh court business is simply transferred to Newry.

Consideration was given to closing Downpatrick Courthouse however the poor public transport links would cause court users real difficulty in traveling to either of the alternative venues. Therefore at this time Downpatrick Courthouse will remain open.

1.30 In the new Western Division we will proceed with the previously announced closure of **Magherafelt Courthouse** but, as a result of the changes to the Local Government Districts, the business will now transfer to Dungannon rather than Antrim. We also propose the closure of **Strabane** and **Enniskillen Courthouses** with the business being transferred to Omagh Courthouse.

1.31 The proposals outlined in this document would therefore see the reduction of the current court estate from 20 courthouses to 12 courthouses. In drawing up these proposals we have evaluated the current business trends and courtroom usage and business can be transferred and accommodated within this smaller, focused estate.

1.32 The table below provides estimated financial savings associated with the proposed closures. The current estimated revenue savings from the rationalisation proposals in this paper are more than £1m per annum.

New Court Division	Courthouse Closures	Annual recurrent savings
North Eastern	Lisburn	£143,865
	Ards	£191,818
	Ballymena	£223,351
	Limavady	£33,866
South Eastern	Armagh	£217,406
Western	Magherafelt	£50,971
	Strabane	£101,012
	Enniskillen	£92,439
Total		£1,054,728

1.33 The figures outlined in the table do not include the additional consequential savings that we would expect to achieve through a reorganisation of administrative business processes at the remaining venues. Nor do they include savings which we believe will be achieved by some of our partner agencies who will also be able to reduce costs if these venues close. Estimates for some of these savings are included later in this paper.

1.34 The rationalisation proposals are discussed in more detail at Chapters 6 – 9.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 In recent years NICTS has consulted on proposals in relation to a number of its smaller court venues. In 2009, five court venues (in Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane) became Hearing Centres i.e. part-time venues that were only open on days on which a court or other tribunal was sitting. In November 2012, following a further consultation, the Minister for Justice announced his decision to close four of the five Hearing Centres permanently. Bangor and Larne Courthouses closed in March 2013. Limavady and Magherafelt Courthouses will close on commencement of the single jurisdiction provisions in the Justice Bill.
- 2.2 However, clearly NICTS is now operating in a very different financial environment and therefore it is appropriate that we, in the context of the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme of Public Sector Reform and Restructuring, carefully consider all the options available to us as we seek to identify efficiencies in the way business is conducted. NICTS expects to be asked to find additional savings of circa £3m in the next financial year. This will mean a further reduction in the number of frontline posts and the implementation of a range of other cost cutting and income generating measures such as increasing some of our fees. However, NICTS simply cannot continue to deliver savings of this magnitude through these measures alone. Consequently, we do not believe that maintaining the *status quo* in terms of the court estate is a sustainable option.
- 2.3 The challenge for us therefore is to deliver a court estate that provides court users with services and facilities consistent with the standards of a modern justice system and which is affordable within the reduced budget available to us.
- 2.4 As indicated earlier in this document, NICTS is not the only court service that has had to implement a programme of closures. Colleagues in England and Wales, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland have all recently dramatically reduced the numbers of courthouses operating within their jurisdictions. It has been a useful exercise to benchmark our proposals against the experiences of our neighbouring jurisdictions as part of our considerations.

2.5 While these proposals are not just about delivering savings, it is vital that we take decisions now that will allow us to operate within the reduced resources available to us in the years to come. Any change to the court estate will be a cause for concern to those directly and indirectly affected, however, it is important to recognise that a reduced number of court venues will allow us to focus our resources across a smaller estate to improve the services we deliver to court users, including victims and witnesses. Having more courts running simultaneously at particular venues could also achieve greater flexibility to dispose of business more efficiently.

2.6 This consultation paper therefore seeks views on:

- A reconfiguration of the existing court boundaries to take account of changes to Local Government Districts in Northern Ireland;
- A range of proposals to rationalise the court estate; and
- The concept of dedicated civil and family centres and the brigading of criminal business.

2.7 NICTS is seeking the views of interested individuals and organisations, and a copy of the document is available on the NICTS website (www.courtsni.gov.uk). We believe that the proposals in this consultation paper preserve access to justice for the people of Northern Ireland in these times of significant financial constraint and establish a sound structural basis for Northern Ireland's justice system to develop.

2.8 We invite all who read this document to approach it with an open mind and to respond to it constructively. We hope that, with the benefit of this consultation, it will provide a configuration of courts that will best serve the needs of those who use them.

2.9 Several questions are posed throughout and again at chapter 10 of this consultation document and we would be particularly grateful for views on these.

2.10 Please respond by **18th May 2015** to:

Email: consultations@courtsni.gov.uk

By post: Consultation Co-ordinator
Rationalisation of the Court Estate Consultation
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
Laganside House
23-27 Oxford Street
BELFAST
BT1 3LA

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3. Background, drivers for change and other considerations

3.1 NICTS supports the Minister for Justice in discharging his statutory responsibility to provide an efficient court system to meet the needs of the Northern Ireland public. The locations of our current courthouses are shown below.



3.2 There are currently 20 courthouses¹ in Northern Ireland. NICTS is committed to ensuring that court users have access to facilities and accommodation that meets their needs, particularly vulnerable and intimidated witnesses, children and disabled people. In some locations, however, improvement is just not physically possible due to the original design and structure of the buildings.

3.3 During the years when funding for refurbishment and new building was available we were able to create a number of modern court facilities, including those in Antrim, Dungannon, Newry and Laganside Courts in Belfast. These are modern courthouses which offer high quality facilities and, through this rationalisation programme, we would seek to maximise the return from this investment.

3.4 The current court structure has served Northern Ireland well, and the role of the courts in delivering local justice is valued by communities. NICTS recognises the

¹ There are 4 court locations in Belfast, namely the Royal Courts of Justice, Laganside Courts Complex, The Old Town Hall building which was temporarily closed in November 2014 and Mays Chambers which is used primarily by the Coroners Service. We have not included Banbridge in the total as this is being used as an Inquiry Centre.

unease that may be felt locally by the closure of a courthouse but, in light of the continuing pressure on public finances, the court system, like other public services, has to be structured in a way that makes best use of the public money that the Executive invests in it.

The financial position

3.5 The table below outlines the NICTS budget settlement for the current Comprehensive Spending Review period (2011/12 to 2014/15) adjusted for various reform changes².

NICTS Budget

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
Resource Budget (adjusted for reform changes)	45,964	46,014	47,541	47,574	40,816
Less: Budget 2010 Budget Cuts	5,547	4,662	6,303	6,758	
Updated Initial NICTS Budget	40,422	42,352	41,238	40,816	40,816
Additional Cuts				2,652	4,387*
Revised NICTS Budget				38,164	36,429
Capital	4,460	2,280	1,750	2,250	1,200

* This figure includes the additional savings from 2014/15 of £2,652

3.6 Although final figures have yet to be agreed, the DOJ draft budget proposes that the core DOJ will face budget reductions of over 20% on the opening 2014/15 position in order to offer some protection to frontline organisations such as NICTS. In this context the draft budget is expected to reflect that NICTS allocation will be reduced by £4.4m on the initial 2014/15 position (a reduction of 10.8%). Additionally NICTS will need to fund our own inflationary pressures. This means that in addition to the recurrent savings delivered in 2014/15 we need to find around £3m of further savings if we are to live within our 2015/16 anticipated allocation. In addition to the position set out above NICTS would expect to have a number of other significant unfunded pressures during the year. Budget

² This is in relation to Tribunal reform, transfer of functions to DOJ including policy, legal aid sponsorship and internal audit, budget transfers as a result of shared services and the transfer of Parole Commissioners to NICTS.

allocations beyond the 2015/16 year are expected to be equally, if not more, challenging.

- 3.7 These savings have been achieved through the extensive review of contracted services, reduction in leasehold accommodation, closure of two Hearing Centres (in Bangor and Larne) and the temporary closure of the Old Townhall Building, revised tribunal hearing schedules, a move to Northern Ireland Civil Service shared services, reductions in back office functions, rationalisation of senior management structure, suppression of posts, effective vacancy management, and a review of other key processes and expenses.
- 3.8 The proposals set out in this paper to rationalise the court estate are, as previously explained, just one strand of a broad range of measures being considered under our Modernisation Programme which is designed to deliver the required efficiencies while continuing to provide an acceptable standard of service.
- 3.9 When considering what else could be done to reduce running costs, we have been cautious to avoid undermining the essential effectiveness of the administration of justice. As the court estate accounts for a considerable proportion of the NICTS budget baseline, it is right to consider the options for potential savings. NICTS is mindful that as we move forward the focus will increasingly centre on the funding of either people or buildings.
- 3.10 The proposals to rationalise the court estate will allow us to protect essential judicial and staff resources to operate the system as a whole. They will allow future investment, particularly in facilities for victims and witnesses and in communication technology, to be targeted across a smaller group of buildings, maximising the benefit of that investment in the services delivered to court users. We are clear that we cannot provide better access to justice by avoiding change.
- 3.11 The actual savings achieved will depend on the final decisions made following the consultation process. However, the current estimate of the potential on-going revenue savings from the rationalisation proposals in this paper, if taken to their

fullest extent, is more than £1m a year. This does not include the additional consequential savings that we would expect to achieve through a reorganisation and streamlining of administrative business processes at the remaining venues with any resultant staffing reductions being accommodated through the Civil Service Voluntary Exit Scheme. Nor does it include savings which we believe will be achieved by some of our partner agencies.

3.12 We acknowledge that there would be some one-off, up-front and recurring expenses for us arising for these proposals, namely:

- One-off costs associated with preparing the buildings for closure and eventual sale;
- Annual retention costs for securing and maintaining buildings following closure but pending disposal, such as security and some basic heating costs. Where the vacated building is listed there may be additional costs to ensure that we comply with statutory or regulatory obligations;
- The one-off costs of preparing receiving sites to accommodate additional staff, judiciary and court business; and
- Recurring costs (over 3 years) in relation to staff relocation costs.

Where a cost is recurring it has already been netted off against the projected annual savings. One-off costs have also been identified and would be netted off from the savings in the year that a particular closure is implemented.

3.14 We are cognisant that previous estate reviews have indicated a potential for resale of a limited number of our court properties, however given the current economic climate we are cautious to suggest that it will be possible for us to sell any of the court properties in the short term. While the possibility of resale has been considered when reviewing each location we have not relied on this to project income to meet budgetary pressures.

3.15 Any court buildings which are closed as a result of the proposals will continue to be owned and maintained by the Department of Justice. Some of these buildings have a listed status and we recognise that they must be maintained to protect this, therefore we have reduced the estimated savings for each venue to account for on-going maintenance costs.

Question

Q1: Do you agree that in the current financial position it is right to consider the management of court business at fewer courthouses where there is a suitable courthouse within a reasonable travelling distance?

Capacity and business trends

3.16 The amount of business we can anticipate coming before the courts is a significant factor in any assessment of future need. Historic business trends are shown in the table below.

Business Received

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	% difference 10/11 to 13/14
Crown Court	1,633	1,645	1,786	1,746	7
Magistrates' court - adult	56,613	51,807	49,801	44,822	-21
Magistrates' court - youth	3,466	2,695	2,303	2,230	-36
Total criminal business	61,712	56,147	53,890	48,798	-21
Civil Bills (NIDs*)	7,701	7,053	6,490	7,641	-1
Small Claims	12,920	13,039	11,898	11,812	-9
Total civil business	20,621	20,092	18,388	19,453	-6
Children's Order applications	5,541	5,873	5,967	5,841	5
Divorces	2,566	2,807	2,625	2,434	-5
Total family business	8,107	8,680	8,592	8,275	2

*NIDs are Notices of Intention to Defend

3.17 Overall levels of criminal business have been declining, with a marked reduction in the magistrates' adult and youth courts and a small increase in the Crown Court. Levels of civil business are also reducing while family business is showing a modest increase.

3.18 In addition, there are a number of forthcoming initiatives which could reduce these figures further, for example the introduction of prosecutorial fines for lower level criminal cases, and an emphasis on the use of mediation and other forms

of alternative dispute resolution for civil disputes and family matters before a case comes to court. However we have not made any predictions on reductions to court sitting requirements as previous experience would suggest that the more serious and complex cases left within the system take proportionately more court sitting time to dispose of.

3.19 We have also considered the capacity of the remaining venues to accommodate both Tribunal and Coroners business and are satisfied that a reduced court estate as envisaged by these proposals would still provide sufficient accommodation for both areas of business. However the reduced number of venues means that it will be important to forecast and plan this business, particularly for lengthier hearings over consecutive days or weeks.

3.20 In developing the proposals for this paper we have taken the fairly cautious planning assumption that business levels will remain steady at their current levels and we have therefore not suggested any significant reductions in sitting days within the proposals. We are conscious however that, following the implementation of any closures, there may be merit in reviewing conjoined business volumes to determine if the same numbers of sittings are required in the future. We will consider this further in discussions with the Lord Chief Justice.

Impact of closures on court users

3.21 In developing the proposals contained in this paper NICTS recognises that any court closure will have a detrimental impact on some of those who are required to attend court and those who represent them. For example many members of the legal profession have offices near courthouses located in provincial towns and will therefore incur additional cost, as will their clients, in travelling to other venues. Consequently, NICTS has made significant investment in the way that it delivers its court office services and the first choice of those who have administrative business to conduct should be the use of technology: electronic communication, web-based systems and telephone.

3.22 However, for the purpose of attending court hearings, NICTS also recognises the importance of access to justice and ensuring that the proposed

arrangements are reasonable. From previous court user surveys (the most recent being 2011) we know that only a small minority of those attending court use public transport – 4.7% used buses and 1.4% used trains. Nonetheless, in assessing the options for transferring business, the availability of public transport has been an important consideration. We have sought to ensure that the journey time by public transport from the current to the alternative court venue should not as far as possible exceed 60 minutes and that people will be able to arrive at the start of the case in which they are concerned and be able to return home by public transport each day.

- 3.23 We have also carried out an analysis of the most outlying electoral wards and established the maximum distance that someone from that area may have to travel to an alternative court venue under our proposals. This revealed that under the proposals the majority of traveling distances to the alternative venue will be between 19 and 43 miles.
- 3.24 It is worth noting that other jurisdictions, in rationalising their court estates, set the following travel/distance tolerance levels:
- Ireland - between 30 and 60 miles distance between alternative court venues;
 - England and Wales - a travel time to court for the public of 1 hour; and
 - Scotland - ability to travel by public transport to arrive by the start of proceedings and to return home by public transport the same day. Scotland also narrowed their closure considerations to venues within 20 miles of an alternative venue.
- 3.25 In some areas we present an option for Specialist Court Centres i.e. court venues which will deal only with criminal or civil and family business. Under the specialist court arrangements, the maximum travel time may exceed the 60 minute target but we welcome views from consultees whether this might be acceptable given the wider benefits that such specialist centres offer in terms of the separation of different types of business and capacity to deliver improved services and facilities at a dedicated location.

- 3.26 Specialist Court Centres would provide potential to improve consistency and quality of decision making. As in other professions which operate on a specialism basis regional specialist court judges would be able to build their knowledge and skills by working together and sharing learning experiences on a more consistent basis.
- 3.27 There would potentially be better throughput of cases and greater efficiency, with the flexibility of listing more cases that could be shared across the available pool of judiciary on any given day.
- 3.28 Increased travelling is recognised as a likely consequence of the rationalisation proposals. Consultees have previously expressed concern that closures simply transfer costs to other participants in the system. We fully accept that court closures will, in some cases, result in additional travel and cost for some users but the converse of this may also be true and some users may have lower travel costs and shorter distances to travel. It should also be acknowledged that within the current configuration of courthouses the same communities are already travelling to the alternative venues for particular types of business, for example Crown Court or Family Care Centre business which are not routinely conducted at all venues.
- 3.29 During the Hearing Centres consultation there were concerns that increased travel to court would encourage non-attendance and increase the number of arrest warrants being issued to the police, but having reviewed the position following the closure of Bangor and Larne Courthouses there is no evidence that this has happened as a result of those closures.

Impact of closures on the community

- 3.30 We are aware of the role that our court buildings play in the economic life of local communities. People and businesses need to know that, when necessary, access to justice is available to resolve disputes and address criminal activity, and that cases can be resolved within reasonable timescales.
- 3.31 It is important to emphasise that the intention of the proposals in the paper is not to reduce the overall level of activity within our courts, but to realign where

that business is undertaken to primarily take account of financial pressures, the Review of Public Administration and the move to specialist courts. Cases, judiciary and the majority of staff will transfer to the new locations. We will continue to invest, within the resources available to us, in the court estate. The overall economic impact of these proposals at a Northern Ireland level should, therefore, be broadly cost neutral.

- 3.32 In practice, by primarily releasing resources from buildings rather than solely cutting capacity through reduced staffing and judicial sitting days, the proposals should help preserve economic activity relative to the *status quo*. However with the transfer of activity away from some locations and the closure of court buildings, we acknowledge that there will be some potential economic impacts for individual communities.
- 3.33 In all NICTS locations our staff account for a modest proportion of total employment in the area including those employed in contracted services such as security and cleaning. In addition, the proposed closures broadly relate to those venues with lower levels of business being transacted and this should help to mitigate economic impacts.
- 3.34 We recognise that, alongside the economic impact, some communities regard the presence of a court, even one that sits infrequently, as an important element of each community's heritage and civic identity. However, this needs to be balanced against the fact that many other similar or larger population centres function without a dedicated local court, for example Newcastle, Ballymoney, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey.
- 3.35 It has been suggested that the scale of the savings is not significant enough to justify the closure of some of Northern Ireland's most historic courts. We know there is a strong civic pride in our local courts, and changes to services or closures stir strong emotions. We understand and respect this. However, as mentioned earlier, the current proposals, while primarily focussed on delivering savings, are also about establishing a smaller court estate in which we can target our resources to improve facilities and services.

- 3.36 As has been noted all of our neighbouring jurisdictions have dramatically reduced the numbers of court buildings they operate, and we have looked closely at how this has been achieved to try to minimise the impact on court users and service delivery in those jurisdictions.
- 3.37 Another issue of local concern is the visibility of justice for communities. An important consideration for us is how we can continue to ensure effective reporting of local cases in the media and we have endeavoured to support this through the use of “media lists on-line” which allow journalists better access to information on cases and court listings.
- 3.38 We understand that these proposals may impact on the continued visibility of local justice for the majority of people who rarely, if ever, enter a court building. We would therefore, in particular, invite the local media to submit their views on the proposals in this consultation and any suggestions for improving their access to case information as we recognise they play an important role in promoting open justice.

Question

Q2: Do you consider that the reduction of the court estate will adversely impact on the community’s confidence in the justice system? What, if any, steps could the NICTS take to ensure that confidence is maintained at a local level following any closures?

What the proposals mean for other justice organisations

3.39 We are aware that changes we make to the structure of the court estate can have an impact on the other public service organisations that work alongside us in the support of justice. It would be self-defeating if we proposed structural changes that created such problems for another party in the system that our proposals became unworkable. To avoid this, the proposals in this paper have been developed through preliminary meetings with those bodies with whom we work most closely in managing and supporting the justice system, namely the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), PSNI, Probation Board, Youth Justice Agency (YJA), Prisoner Escort and Court Custody Service (PECCS), Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA).

PPS

- 3.40 PPS recognises the financial challenges facing the justice system and the need for both organisations to review business planning assumptions against the backdrop of a changing summary jurisdiction workload, Review of Public Administration and the single territorial jurisdiction provisions in the new Justice Bill. The rationalisation of the court estate and the creation of new 'Administrative Court Divisions' is crucial to PPS future business planning and response to the current draft budget. PPS is broadly supportive of the proposals and is fully committed to working directly with NICTS and other justice partners during the consultation period, to fully consider the potential for efficiency savings associated with servicing a reduced court estate and ensuring that the needs of court users continue to be met.

PSNI

- 3.41 NICTS representatives met with PSNI who are also at present considering the impact of revised Local Government Districts on their own structures. The PSNI have confirmed that the proposed changes to the court boundary structures will not cause them any particular difficulties. NICTS will have further discussions with PSNI to ensure that the re-organised structures for both agencies are complementary as far as practicable.

Prisons

- 3.42 NICTS met with representatives from the Prisoner Escort and Court Custody Service (PECCS) to discuss the changes outlined in the proposals and to seek their views on the capacity of each remaining venue subsuming new business from the prisoner management perspective. PECCS have welcomed the proposals particularly from a prisoner transport perspective which, if implemented in full, could deliver annual savings to PECCS of around £396k. Although they have confirmed that a small number of the changes may necessitate some minor upgrades to the cell areas in the alternative venues there is nothing which, from their perspective, would preclude any of the proposals being taken forward. We will continue to work with our PECCS partners to ensure that transitions as a result of the consultation will be managed and implemented in a collaborative manner.

3.43 NIGALA

NIGALA is sympathetic to the NICTS financial position and is broadly accepting of the proposals, recognising that some case workers, at some locations, may be required to travel further to attend court hearings. NIGALA has undertaken to engage further with NICTS during the consultation period to identify any scope for better ways of managing business.

3.44 Probation Board

PBNI colleagues recognise the financial challenges facing all justice partner organisations and believe the proposals are workable but would seek to use the consultation period to fully consider if a reduced number of court locations will provide opportunities to better co-ordinate and manage internal resources.

3.45 Youth Justice Agency

YJA appreciates the financial constraints ahead for all criminal justice colleagues and has undertaken to support NICTS in rationalising the court estate. YJA is aware that there is disparity in business going through the various courts and will contribute to a workable solution for all. YJA will also co-operate and participate throughout the consultation period. YJA will play its part in helping to shape and assist plans to address the particular needs of young people in the court system.

Question

Q3: Do you agree that a reduced number of court locations will assist NICTS and our partner organisations to better co-ordinate and manage resources for the benefit of court users?

4. Court boundaries in Northern Ireland

- 4.1 Before turning to look at the proposals to rationalise the court estate, it would be useful to set out the court boundaries which govern the distribution of business in the various court tiers in Northern Ireland.
- 4.2 Historically, Northern Ireland has been divided into County Court Divisions and Petty Sessions (i.e. magistrates' courts) Districts based on the boundaries for Local Government Districts (LGDs).
- Each Petty Sessions District is made up of one or more LGDs; and
 - Each County Court Division is made up of one or more Petty Sessions District.
- 4.3 In contrast, the Crown Court exercises a single geographic jurisdiction and sits at various venues throughout Northern Ireland. The Court of Judicature also has a single Northern Ireland-wide jurisdiction and sits in Belfast.
- 4.4 In broad terms, the jurisdiction of both magistrates' courts and county courts is determined with reference to the County Court Division, for example the County Court Division in which the offence was committed; the County Court Division in which a party to the proceedings resides. Where there are a number of court venues within a Division which deal with a particular type of business, cases will generally be listed at the nearest appropriate venue.
- 4.5 References to Petty Sessions Districts tend to relate to the lodging of papers or the holding of records and are somewhat out-moded as documents can now be lodged in any court office in Northern Ireland and many records are held centrally or on IT systems.

4.6 The following table shows the current County Court Divisions (and LGD boundaries which currently comprise each Division).

Makeup of County Court Divisions

Court division	Current Petty Sessions Districts	Current Local Government Districts	Courthouses
Antrim	North Antrim	Coleraine Ballymoney Moyle	Coleraine
	Antrim	Antrim	Antrim
	Ballymena	Ballymena	Ballymena
	Larne	Larne	
Ards	Down	Down	Downpatrick
	Ards	Ards	Newtownards
	Castlereagh	Castlereagh	
	North Down	North Down	
Armagh and South Down	Armagh	Armagh	Armagh
	Newry and Mourne	Newry and Mourne	Newry
	Banbridge	Banbridge	
Belfast	Belfast	Belfast Newtownabbey Carrickfergus	RCJ Laganside Old Townhall
Craigavon	Craigavon	Craigavon	Craigavon
	Lisburn	Lisburn	Lisburn
Fermanagh and Tyrone	East Tyrone	Cookstown Dungannon	Dungannon
	Omagh	Omagh	Omagh
	Strabane	Strabane	Strabane
	Fermanagh	Fermanagh	Enniskillen
Londonderry	Londonderry	Derry	Londonderry
	Limavady	Limavady	Limavady
	Magherafelt	Magherafelt	Magherafelt

Review of Public Administration

4.7 Following the Review of Public Administration (RPA), in April 2015, the current 26 Local Government Districts in Northern Ireland will be replaced by 11 new Local Government Districts or 'Super Councils'. The proposed boundaries of the new Local Government Districts are broadly based on the amalgamation of the existing councils as outlined in the table below.

Proposed Local Government District	Existing Local Government Districts
Belfast	Belfast
Derry and Strabane	Derry Strabane
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	Armagh Banbridge Craigavon
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Lisburn Castlereagh
Newry, Mourne and Down	Newry and Mourne Down
Antrim and Newtownabbey	Antrim Newtownabbey
North Down and Ards	Ards North Down
Causeway Coast and Glens	Ballymoney Coleraine Limavady Moyle
Fermanagh and Omagh	Fermanagh Omagh
Mid and East Antrim	Ballymena Carrickfergus Larne
Mid Ulster	Cookstown Dungannon (and South Tyrone) Magherafelt

4.8 The new districts are not a straightforward amalgamation in all cases. For example, the Belfast boundaries will be revised to reflect the expansion of the city (and will subsume a number of areas which currently fall within Lisburn and Castlereagh). There are also some minor boundary changes in the current Down and Banbridge Districts.

Implications of RPA for Court Boundaries

- 4.9 We previously consulted on proposals to replace the current rigid statutory framework of court boundaries for county courts and magistrates' courts with a single Northern Ireland-wide jurisdiction underpinned by more flexible administrative arrangements. These provisions are contained in the Justice Bill currently before the Assembly.
- 4.10 County Court Divisions and Petty Sessions Districts will be replaced by Administrative Court Divisions that will continue to determine where court business will be heard. However, the new arrangements will afford some additional flexibility to list business in a different Division where the judge (or the Lord Chief Justice) determines that there is good reason to do so. This may include the avoidance of delay; the convenience of witnesses or the provision of particular facilities.
- 4.11 In that earlier consultation we concluded that the new Administrative Court Divisions would continue to be based on a configuration of Local Government Districts for the convenience of court users. We set out a number of potential configurations but undertook to consult again prior to the introduction of the new arrangements.
- 4.12 The court closure proposals contained in this paper will have a very significant bearing on what may be the best configuration of court boundaries going forward.
- 4.13 The following table sets out which new Local Government Districts are included within each Administrative Court Division. However, within these Divisions the proposals also seek to minimise the travel impact for court users, in particular those reliant on public transport. For example, we propose that court business from the Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus areas will continue to be dealt with in Laganside, which should be more readily accessible than other court venues within the Division.

Administrative Court Division	New Local Government District
North Eastern	Belfast Lisburn and Castlereagh North Down and Ards Antrim and Newtownabbey Mid and East Antrim Causeway Coast and Glens
South Eastern	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Newry, Mourne and Down
Western	Derry and Strabane Mid Ulster Fermanagh and Omagh

4.14 The detailed proposals in Chapters 6 - 8 are based on the three Administrative Court Divisions model. We consider that this configuration will support a future design for the court estate which will be fit for purpose in terms of capacity and facilities and will preserve access to justice for court users. Under this model each of the Administrative Court Divisions is larger than those County Court Divisions which currently exist, but it will continue to be the case that where there are a number of court venues within a Division which deal with a particular type of business, cases will generally be listed at the nearest appropriate venue.

Questions

Q4: Do you agree that it is appropriate to preserve the link between the new Administrative Court Divisions and the new Local Government Districts? If not, is there an alternative model that you would suggest?

Q5: Is the proposed three Administrative Court Divisions model as set out in Figure 3 the most appropriate? If you consider that the boundary of any of the suggested Administrative Court Division should be redrawn, please specify what changes you would like to see made, and give your reasons for the changes you propose.

●	—	Courthouses
●	—	Courthouses for closure
—	—	Transferred business
<i>Mid Ulster</i>	—	New Local Government District



5. Identification of court closures and transfer of business

- 5.1 Before considering which court venues may be suitable for closure NICTS evaluated every courthouse within its estate using a set of criteria, including –
- Caseload at each court venue;
 - The physical condition of the buildings;
 - The numbers of courtrooms available at each building and their characteristics i.e. can they accommodate a range of court business;
 - Existing technology available at venues;
 - Facilities for victims and witnesses, such as separate waiting areas, voluntary sector offices/rooms and remote link rooms for video evidence;
 - Accessibility of facilities for victims, witnesses and vulnerable users;
 - Travel time to an alternative venue;
 - The cell capacity and access to courtrooms for prisoners; and
 - Potential for public sector re-use or disposal or re-sale.
- 5.2 The purpose of the criteria above was to identify potential courthouses for closure whilst preserving sufficient courtrooms and facilities to handle business levels and continue to meet user needs. Similar methodologies have been used in other jurisdictions to inform their court closure proposals; however in considering our criteria we paid particular attention to those areas of importance to this jurisdiction. Each criterion was scored, and all courthouses assessed against these criteria using a points based system.
- 5.3 Once the buildings with the lowest scores had been identified, we looked at the potential savings that their closures would secure and whether they would fit into a workable court structure which would also align with the new government districts. We also tested that our findings aligned with previous reports and assessments of the court estate.
- 5.4 For those courts that would have to accommodate additional business, consideration has been given to whether it would be feasible to accommodate the conjoined business (that is the current business and that proposed to be transferred from another court) within the available courtrooms in the

courthouse. An analysis of business volumes comparing previous years' workload with future projected workload to determine the capability of conjoining business has been carried out.

- 5.5 We recognise that there may be concerns that the capacity of a smaller estate would be insufficient to accommodate existing pressures. However on the basis of the assumptions about business levels, our assessment is that there would be sufficient court capacity to deal with the anticipated volume of business in the majority of locations. In two of the proposals we have recommended some additional measures to increase capacity for the conjoined business.
- 5.6 The listing of business and the scheduling of court sittings is a matter for the Lord Chief Justice and the judiciary. For that reason, where we provide a court calendar for conjoined business this is for illustrative purposes to show that there is capacity to accommodate all the business without reducing the number of sittings.
- 5.7 However we believe that the rationalisation of the court estate would provide a sound basis on which to review the existing court calendar to determine if changes are required. Where there are a number of shorter sitting days or court lists each month there may be scope to combine these to create additional capacity to deal with more complex or contested business.
- 5.8 Consolidating business into fewer court venues does increase risk. Having fewer sites reduces the options available for responding to any exceptional events, unusual peaks in demand, or unforeseen growth. The counterbalancing factor is that consolidation can be seen as creating a better environment in which to tackle the issues that underpin inefficiency in the system. Drawing business from a number of local courts into a single venue creates a critical mass of business that can be dealt with more flexibly by the available judicial resources.
- 5.9 The co-location of judges dealing with the same type of business could facilitate better case management and disposal of court business than could be delivered by individual judges sitting at different venues. In such an arrangement there is

scope to provide a dedicated sitting schedule for family and civil business and benefit court users.

5.10 The projected savings figures set out alongside each of the proposals relate to a reduction in running costs (security, utilities, infrastructure etc.) less any recurrent costs which will be incurred to maintain the vacated venue while it remains within the court estate. In addition we would expect to realise additional consequential savings through a re-organisation of administrative business processes at the remaining venues.

5.11 The following chapters set out the detail of our proposals for each new Administrative Court Division and options for courthouses within each.

6. Proposals for the North Eastern Division

6.1 The proposed North Eastern Division will incorporate the following new Local Government Districts –

- Belfast;
- Lisburn and Castlereagh;
- North Down and Ards;
- Causeway Coast and Glens;
- Mid and East Antrim; and
- Antrim and Newtownabbey.

6.2 Within this area we currently have eight court venues dealing with Crown, county and magistrates' courts business –

- Laganside Courts, Belfast;
- Old Townhall Building, Belfast (temporarily closed);
- Lisburn;
- Newtownards;
- Antrim;
- Ballymena;
- Coleraine; and
- Limavady.

In addition the Royal Courts of Justice and Mays Chambers venues will be within this Division. These venues will continue to accommodate High Court and Coroners business.

6.3 Under the proposals outlined below the number of court venues would be reduced to four -

- Laganside Courts, Belfast;
- Old Townhall Building, Belfast;
- Antrim;
- Coleraine.

6.4 We are satisfied in respect of the proposed closures that in addition to the retained venues being able to accommodate court business there is sufficient

capacity in appropriate courtrooms for Tribunal hearings currently heard at Newtownards to be accommodated within Old Townhall Building or other Belfast venues and for Tribunal hearings currently heard at Ballymena to be accommodated at Coleraine.

- 6.5 Likewise there is capacity to accommodate any Coroners courts required in the other venues within the Division and courtroom accommodation will continue to be allocated within Laganside Courts for coronial business.



(i) Transfer of business from Old Townhall Building to Laganside

6.6 In October 2014, the Justice Minister accepted a recommendation from NICTS to temporarily close the Old Townhall Building and to transfer the youth court and family proceedings court business to Laganside Courts. This decision arose as a result of the acute in-year budgetary pressures faced by NICTS.

6.7 During the planning process for this transfer NICTS consulted with the judiciary, legal professionals, statutory and voluntary agencies in order to assess the

requirements for those attending the transferred courts. The following arrangements have been put in place:

- The Youth Court has been located in Court 1 in Laganside Courts which is the courtroom at the Chichester Street end of the building;
- The adjacent courts at Court 2 and 3 will be used for family court business to include family proceedings and the family care centre;
- The use of Courts 1 – 3 for youth and family business means that those using those courts will be accommodated in the separate waiting area at that end of level 2;
- The physical separation of Courts 1-3 from the county courts and adult magistrates' courts in Courts 6-10 is secured by a set of double doors in the corridor leading to Courts 1-3;
- Those attending the Youth Court in Court 1 will also have ready access to consultation facilities and support services including the Youth Justice Agency staff and the NSPCC Young Witness Service. These will be located proximate to the youth court;
- There are also waiting and consultation facilities available for those attending the family courts.

6.8 NICTS has worked closely with NSPCC and Victim Support to ensure that the alternative arrangements, including office space for staff and volunteers and waiting rooms for vulnerable witnesses, meets their needs. In addition, the remote evidence link for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses has been moved from Old Townhall Building to the Public Prosecution Service's offices in Chichester Street. This remote facility will remain in place in PPS offices for the foreseeable future and we believe that this is preferable to the previous arrangement which still required witnesses to come in to a court building, albeit separate from the one where the trial was taking place.

6.9 It is estimated that the continued closure of the Old Townhall Building would realise savings of £336k year in running costs. One option would be to make the current temporary arrangements permanent, however we have set out below an alternative proposal which transfers all Lisburn and Newtownards Court business to Belfast and establishes Old Townhall Building as a dedicated Family Court Centre.

(ii) Transfer of business from Lisburn and Newtownards to Belfast

- 6.10 In this proposal Old Townhall Building would be reopened primarily as a specialist family court centre with all civil and criminal courts being brigaded in Laganside Courts to facilitate the sharing of business between judges and to enhance judicial case management and disposal. Youth Court business would remain in Laganside but would remain physically separate from adult criminal courts.
- 6.11 Our proposal is that Lisburn and Newtownards Courthouses will close with family business transferring to the Old Townhall Building and all civil and criminal business transferring to Laganside Courts.
- 6.12 The distance from Lisburn to Belfast is 8.7 miles and takes approximately 13 minutes by car. The journey by train takes 30 minutes. There are train stations adjacent to both court venues and there is a regular service.
- 6.13 The distance from Newtownards to Belfast is 10.9 miles and takes approximately 27 minutes by car. The journey by bus takes 43 minutes. There are bus stations close to both court venues and there is a regular service.
- 6.14 An indicative calendar has been drawn up for Lisburn and Newtownards business sitting in the Old Townhall Building and Laganside Courts which clearly demonstrates that there is sufficient capacity to accommodate the transferred business while retaining sufficient capacity to facilitate any increase in demand for court, tribunal or inquest sittings. Given the number of courtrooms and therefore the scale of the indicative calendar it has not been possible to include within this document but it can be made available separately if required.
- 6.15 It is estimated that the closure of Lisburn Courthouse would realise savings of £144k a year in running costs. The savings from the closure of Newtownards Courthouse are estimated at £192k a year in running costs.
- 6.16 In terms of running costs, the reopening of the Old Townhall Building would be cost neutral when considered against the savings made from the closure of

Lisburn and Newtownards Courthouses. However, bringing all this work together within the Belfast Courts Complex (Laganside Courts and the Old Townhall Building) will allow NICTS to restructure its administrative processes and reduce the level of managerial overheads. There will be greater scope to manage court business more flexibly and to achieve efficiency savings in the region of £190k per annum.

- 6.17 In addition, we believe that the court buildings in Lisburn and Newtownards offer greater potential for re-use or disposal than the Old Townhall Building.

(iii) Transfer of business from Limavady to Coleraine

- 6.18 For the remainder of the Division, we initially considered the potential to establish Coleraine Courthouse as a Civil and Family Centre with all criminal business being listed at Antrim Courthouse. However, due to excessive travel times and unsuitable public transportation links between Limavady and Antrim it was not possible to establish such a model which would not adversely impact court users significantly.

- 6.19 Consequently, we will proceed with the previously announced closure of the Hearing Centre at Limavady and the transfer of business (including youth, domestic and family proceedings) to Coleraine. An illustrative calendar for the conjoined business of Limavady at Coleraine is set out in the table below. It should be noted that county court civil days other than calendar days are not fixed and are allocated by local judiciary based on business volumes and are therefore not detailed in the illustrative calendar. There is sufficient capacity to facilitate any increase in demand for court, tribunal or inquest sittings.

Coleraine incorporating Limavady				
		Courtroom 1	Courtroom 2*	Courtroom 3
Week 1	1st Monday	Adult – Coleraine	Appeals	
	1st Tuesday		Appeals	Domestic – Coleraine and Limavady
	1st Wednesday	Adult - Limavady	Appeals	
	1st Thursday	Adult - Coleraine	Appeals	
	1st Friday	Departmental - Coleraine	Appeals	
Week 2	2nd Monday	Adult - Coleraine		Family – Coleraine and Limavady
	2nd Tuesday			Youth – Coleraine and Limavady
	2nd Wednesday	Adult - Limavady		
	2nd Thursday	Adult - Coleraine		
	2nd Friday	Adult - Coleraine		
Week 3	3rd Monday	Adult- Coleraine		
	3rd Tuesday			
	3rd Wednesday	Adult and Departmental - Limavady		
	3rd Thursday	Adult - Criminal		Family – Coleraine and Limavady
	3rd Friday	Adult - Coleraine		
Week 4	4th Monday	Adult - Coleraine		Family – Coleraine and Limavady
	4th Tuesday			Youth – Coleraine and Limavady
	4th Wednesday	Adult - Limavady		
	4th Thursday	Adult - Coleraine		
	4th Friday	Adult - Coleraine		
Week 5	5th Monday	Adult - Coleraine		
	5th Tuesday	Adult – Coleraine		
	5th Wednesday	Adult - Limavady		
	5th Thursday	Adult - Coleraine		
	5th Friday	Adult – Coleraine		

6.20 The distance from Limavady to Coleraine is 15.4 miles and takes approximately 23 minutes by car. The journey by bus takes 45 minutes and there are suitable services.

6.21 As Limavady is currently operating as a Hearing Centre it is estimated that the closure would realise modest savings in the region of £34k a year in running costs. This is less than the savings estimated during the Hearing Centre consultation for this venue due in part to other cost savings measures which have been implemented in the interim period e.g. reduction in contract costs, reductions in planned maintenance works etc.

(iv) Closure of Ballymena Courthouse and transfer of business to Antrim.

6.22 In this paper we propose the closure of **Ballymena Courthouse** and transfer of the magistrates' court level business to Antrim³. Antrim and Ballymena county court business would transfer to Coleraine.

6.23 The distance from Ballymena to Antrim is 11.5 miles and takes approximately 22 minutes by car. The journey by bus takes 47 minutes and there are suitable services.

6.24 The illustrative calendar for the conjoined business of Ballymena at Antrim is set out in the table below.

Antrim incorporating Ballymena				
		Courtroom 1	Courtroom 2	Courtroom 3
Week 1	1st Monday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Family - Antrim
	1st Tuesday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Adult – Antrim
	1st Wednesday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Domestic - Ballymena
	1st Thursday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Adult - Ballymena
	1st Friday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Family - Ballymena
Week 2	2nd Monday	Crown	Crown	Youth – Antrim
	2nd Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Antrim
	2nd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Youth - Ballymena
	2nd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Ballymena
	2nd Friday	Crown	Crown	Family - Ballymena
Week 3	3rd Monday	Crown	Crown	Youth and Family – Antrim
	3rd Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Antrim
	3rd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult- Ballymena
	3rd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Domestic – Antrim Domestic – Ballymena
	3rd Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Ballymena
Week 4	4th Monday	Crown	Crown	Youth and Departmental - Ballymena
	4th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Antrim
	4th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Ballymena
	4th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Departmental - Antrim
	4th Friday	Crown	Crown	Family – Ballymena Family – Ballymena (2 nd sitting)
Week 5	5th Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Antrim
	5th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Antrim
	5th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult -Ballymena
	5th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Ballymena
	5th Friday	Crown	Crown	Family – Ballymena

³ Consultees should note that currently magistrates' court business from Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus LGD areas is heard in Belfast. It is not proposed to disturb the business allocation, which is consistent with the principle of listing in the nearest appropriate court

- 6.25 A principle in developing these proposals is to incorporate any transferred business at alternative court venues with no reduction in the number of sittings and ensuring the transferred business is listed in suitable courtroom accommodation.
- 6.26 The straight transfer of current magistrates court sitting days from Ballymena to Antrim cannot be wholly accommodated within court 3. For illustrative purposes the calendar above has combined a small number of shorter court sittings, although the final calendar would have to be determined by the judiciary.
- 6.27 Under this model, Antrim and Ballymena county court business (including small claims) will be heard at Coleraine as the primary venue for Antrim and Ballymena county court business. As civil business does not generally require multiple attendances of the parties it is expected that the impact of this on the public will be limited. There would also be scope for some county court business to be dealt with in Belfast if that is more convenient to the parties.
- 6.28 Alternatively, there is ample capacity for all Ballymena court business (magistrates and county court) to be dealt with in Coleraine and consultees' views are sought on whether transferring to Antrim or Coleraine is preferable.
- 6.29 It is estimated that the closure of Ballymena Courthouse would realise savings of £223k a year in running costs.

Questions

- Q6: Are there any significant factors which you consider would preclude the closure of any of the proposed courthouse(s) in this Division?**
- Q7: Do you support the proposal to establish Old Townhall Building as a specialist Family Court Centre for Belfast, Lisburn and Newtownards and to list criminal and youth business from these areas in Laganside.**
- Q8: If Ballymena is closed, would it be preferable to transfer the business to Antrim or Coleraine?**

Q9: What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure and transfer of court business have on you? Please give reasons for your answer.

7. Proposals for the South Eastern Court Division

7.1 There are two proposed options for the South Eastern Division.

- **Option 1 (Specialist Court):** The closure of **Armagh Courthouse** and the establishment of Craigavon as the main Civil, Family, Youth and Tribunals Centre for Division and Newry as the main Criminal Court Centre.
- **Option 2 (Straight Transfer):** The closure of **Armagh Courthouse** and transfer of all Armagh business only to Newry Courthouse.

Under both options Downpatrick Courthouse will remain open and will deal with Crown, county and magistrates business.

7.2 The South Eastern Court Division will incorporate the following new Local Government Districts:

- Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon; and
- Newry, Mourne and Down.

7.3 Within this area we have currently four court venues dealing with Crown, county and magistrates' courts business:

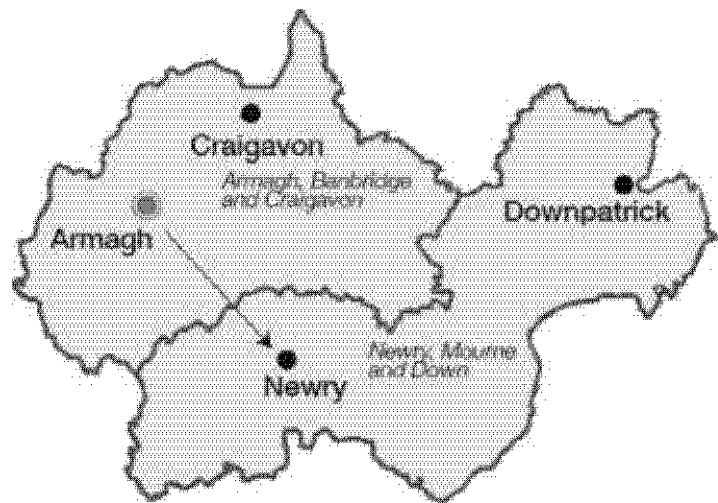
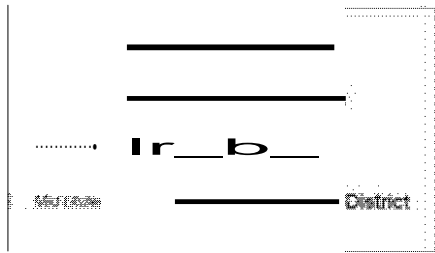
- Armagh;
- Craigavon;
- Downpatrick; and
- Newry.

7.4 Regardless of the option decided upon the proposals outlined would reduce the number of court venues to three

- Craigavon;
- Downpatrick; and
- Newry.

7.5 We are satisfied in respect of the proposed closures that in addition to the retained venues being able to accommodate court business there is sufficient capacity in appropriate courtrooms in Newry, Craigavon or Downpatrick to

accommodate Tribunal hearings. Likewise there is capacity to accommodate any Coroners courts required within the Division.



NB – the transfer of business shown in the map above relates to Option 2 and would be a split transfer between Craigavon and Newry under Option 1.

Option 1 -Specialist Courts

7.6 In this option it is proposed that:

- Craigavon will become a Civil, Family, Youth and Tribunals Centre servicing Craigavon, Armagh and Newry business only; and
- Newry will become a criminal centre servicing Craigavon, Armagh and Newry business only.
- Downpatrick will continue to service the mixed business it currently deals with and in addition will also service family business for the Down area.

7.7 Due to poor public transportation routes from Downpatrick it is difficult to support the transfer of frequent magistrates' court sittings to either Newry or Craigavon. Consequently, it is proposed under this option that Downpatrick will continue to deal with existing county court and magistrates' court (including family

proceedings) business. Downpatrick could continue to deal with Crown Court business from that area but this would be fairly limited (about 30% of the current crown workload in Ards Division).

- 7.8 The distance from Armagh to Craigavon is 13.7 miles and takes approximately 21 minutes by car. There is no direct bus route and passengers need to change at Portadown. Depending on connections the journey can take 45 to 60 minutes.
- 7.9 The distance from Armagh to Newry is 18.3 miles and takes approximately 28 minutes by car. There is a direct bus route and the journey takes approximately 55 minutes.
- 7.10 The distance from Craigavon to Newry is 25.8 miles and takes approximately 39 minutes by car. There is a direct bus route that takes approximately 54 minutes.
- 7.11 The illustrative calendar for fixed courts business at specialist courts at Newry and Craigavon is set out in the tables below. There is adequate capacity to facilitate any increase in demand for court, tribunal or inquest sittings. It should be noted that county court civil days other than calendar days are not fixed and are allocated by local judiciary based on business volumes and are therefore not detailed in the illustrative calendar for Craigavon Courthouse.
- 7.12 However, it is proposed that Craigavon Court 1 and 2 will be primarily used for county court judge and district judge civil business. All county court civil and family business can be comfortably accommodated within courtrooms 1 and 2 at Craigavon. It will also be possible to use Craigavon courtrooms 1 and 2 as contingency site for short Crown Court jury trials or sentencing days or magistrates contest days, if required.

Newry Criminal Centre

		Courtroom 1*	Courtroom 2	Courtroom 3	Courtroom 4	Courtroom 5
Week 1	1st Monday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Departmental - Banbridge		
	1st Tuesday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Departmental - Craigavon	
	1st Wednesday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
	1st Thursday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Banbridge		
	1st Friday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Adult – Craigavon	
Week 2	2nd Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	2nd Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh		
	2nd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
	2nd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Banbridge		
	2nd Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
Week 3	3rd Monday	Crown	Crown	Departmental – Newry		
	3rd Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh		
	3rd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
	3rd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Banbridge	Adult – Newry	
	3rd Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Craigavon	Departmental – Armagh	
Week 4	4th Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	4th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh		
	4th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
	4th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Banbridge		
	4th Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Craigavon	Adult – Newry	
Week 5	5th Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
	5th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh		
	5th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
	5th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	
	5th Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Adult - Craigavon	

Craigavon Civil, Family and Youth Centre					
		Courtroom 1	Courtroom 2	Courtroom 3	Courtroom 4
Week 1	1st Monday			Family – Newry	
	1st Tuesday			Family – Newry	Family - Craigavon
	1st Wednesday				
	1st Thursday			Domestic - Newry	
	1st Friday				
Week 2	2nd Monday			Youth – Newry	Youth - Craigavon
	2nd Tuesday				
	2nd Wednesday				
	2nd Thursday			Family - Craigavon	Family - Newry
	2nd Friday			Youth - Armagh	Youth and Domestic – Banbridge
Week 3	3rd Monday				
	3rd Tuesday				
	3rd Wednesday			Family - Newry	
	3rd Thursday				
	3rd Friday			Youth – Newry	Youth - Craigavon
Week 4	4th Monday				
	4th Tuesday			Family - Newry	Family and Domestic – Craigavon
	4th Wednesday				
	4th Thursday				
	4th Friday			Youth and Domestic – Armagh	
Week 5	5th Monday				
	5th Tuesday			Family - Newry	
	5th Wednesday				
	5th Thursday				
	5th Friday				

Option 2 - Straight Transfer

7.13 An alternative option for this Division would be a straight transfer of all current Armagh business to Newry.

7.14 The distance from Armagh to Newry is 18.3 miles takes approximately 28 minutes by car. There is a direct bus route and the journey takes approximately 55 minutes.

7.15 The illustrative calendar for the conjoined business at Newry is set out in the table below. It should be noted that county court civil days other than calendar days are not fixed and are allocated by local judiciary based on business volumes and are therefore not detailed in the illustrative calendar. There is adequate capacity to facilitate any increase in demand for court, tribunal or inquest sittings.

Newry incorporating Armagh						
		Courtroom 1*	Courtroom 2	Courtroom 3	Courtroom 4	Courtroom 5
Week 1	1st Monday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Departmental - Banbridge	Family – Newry	
	1st Tuesday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Family – Newry	
	1st Wednesday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	1st Thursday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Banbridge	Domestic - Newry	
	1st Friday	Crown and Appeals	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Youth – Newry	
Week 2	2nd Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	2nd Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Family - Newry	
	2nd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	2nd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Banbridge		
	2nd Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Youth - Armagh	
Week 3	3rd Monday	Crown	Crown	Departmental –Newry	Youth and Domestic – Banbridge	
	3rd Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Family - Newry	
	3rd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	3rd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Banbridge	Adult - Newry	
	3rd Friday	Crown	Crown	Departmental –Armagh	Youth – Newry	
Week 4	4th Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	4th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Family - Newry	
	4th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	4th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Banbridge		
	4th Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry	Youth and Domestic – Armagh	
Week 5	5th Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	5th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Armagh	Family - Newry	
	5th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	5th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		
	5th Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Newry		

7.16 Under this option there would be no significant changes to the court calendar for Craigavon or Downpatrick.

7.17 It is estimated that the closure of Armagh Courthouse would realise savings of £217k a year in running costs.

Questions

Q10: Are there any significant factors which you consider would preclude the closure of Armagh Courthouse?

Q11: Which option for the transfer of business within this Division are you more supportive of: Specialist Court Centres (Option 1) or Straight Transfer (Option 2)?

Q12: What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure and transfer of court business have on you? Please give reasons for your answer?

8. Proposals for the Western Court Division

8.1 The Western Court Division incorporates the following new Local Government Districts:

- Mid Ulster;
- Fermanagh and Omagh; and
- Derry and Strabane.

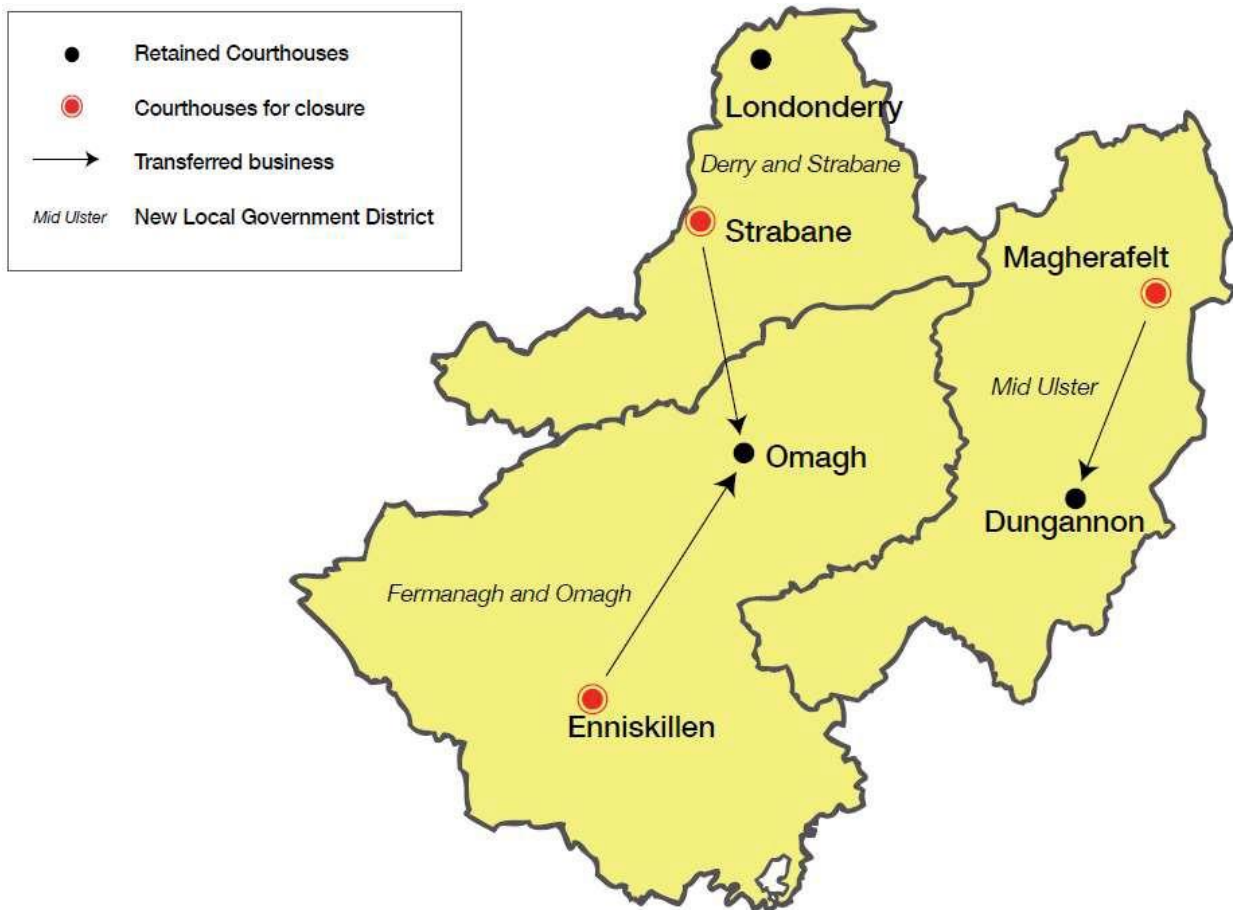
8.2 Within this area we have six court venues dealing with Crown, county and magistrates' courts business:

- Dungannon;
- Magherafelt;
- Omagh;
- Enniskillen;
- Londonderry; and
- Strabane.

8.3 Under the proposals outlined below the number of court venues would be reduced to three -

- Londonderry;
- Dungannon; and
- Omagh.

8.4 We are satisfied in respect of the proposed closures that in addition to the retained venues being able to accommodate court business there is sufficient capacity in appropriate courtrooms within Omagh and Dungannon for Tribunal hearings to be accommodated. Likewise there is capacity to accommodate any Coroners courts required within the Division.



8.5 We considered the creation of dedicated court centres for family and civil business and the brigading of criminal business to facilitate the sharing of business between judges and enhance judicial case management and disposal. However, there was a recognition that the issue of geography and the excessive travel times due to unsuitable public transportation routes precluded the effective operation of this model in the Western Court Division.

8.6 In November 2012, the Justice Minister announced his intention to close the Hearing Centre at Magherafelt following the introduction of the court boundary reforms being carried in the Justice Bill currently before the Assembly.

8.7 At that time it was proposed to transfer the business to Antrim Courthouse. Under the proposed Western Court Division, **Magherafelt** Hearing Centre will close and business would be dealt with in Dungannon Courthouse. In addition it is proposed that **Strabane and Enniskillen** Courthouses will both close and the business will transfer to Omagh.

(i) Transfer of business from Magherafelt to Dungannon

8.8 The distance from Magherafelt to Dungannon is 20 miles and takes approximately 30 minutes by car. The journey by bus takes approximately 50 minutes.

8.9 The illustrative calendar for the conjoined business at Dungannon is set out in the table below. It should be noted that county court civil days other than calendar days are not fixed and are allocated by local judiciary based on business volumes and are therefore not detailed in the illustrative calendar. There is sufficient capacity to facilitate any increase in demand for court, tribunal or inquest sittings.

Dungannon incorporating Magherafelt					
		Courtroom 1	Courtroom 2*	Courtroom 3	Courtroom 4
Week 1	1st Monday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Adult – Dungannon	Youth and Departmental - Magherafelt
	1st Tuesday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Youth and Family - Dungannon	
	1st Wednesday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Adult – Dungannon	
	1st Thursday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Adult – Magherafelt	
	1st Friday	Crown	Crown and Appeals	Adult – Dungannon	
Week 2	2nd Monday	Crown	Crown	Departmental – Dungannon	
	2nd Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Magherafelt	Domestic - Dungannon
	2nd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Dungannon	
	2nd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Family - Dungannon	
	2nd Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Dungannon	
Week 3	3rd Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Dungannon	
	3rd Tuesday	Crown	Crown		Youth – Dungannon
	3rd Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Dungannon	
	3rd Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Magherafelt	
	3rd Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Dungannon	
Week 4	4th Monday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Dungannon	
	4th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Family - Dungannon	
	4th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Dungannon	Youth and Domestic – Magherafelt
	4th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Adult – Magherafelt	
	4th Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Dungannon	
Week 5	5th Monday	Crown	Crown		
	5th Tuesday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Dungannon	
	5th Wednesday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Dungannon	
	5th Thursday	Crown	Crown	Family Dungannon	
	5th Friday	Crown	Crown	Adult - Dungannon	

8.10 As Magherafelt is currently operating as a Hearing Centre it is estimated that the closure would realise modest savings in the region of £51k a year in running costs. This is less than the savings estimated during the Hearing Centre consultation for this venue due in part to other cost savings measures which have been implemented in the interim period e.g. reduction in contract costs, reductions in planned maintenance works etc.

(ii) Transfer of business from Enniskillen and Strabane to Omagh

8.11 Strabane Courthouse currently operates as a Hearing Centre with approximately two scheduled magistrates' courts each week. In addition there are approximately two small claims/county court sittings per month. On closure this business will transfer to Omagh.

8.12 The distance from Strabane to Omagh is 20.2 miles and takes 35 minutes by car. The journey by bus takes 50 minutes. There are bus stations close to both court venues and there are suitable services.

8.13 Enniskillen Courthouse has two courtrooms. It has two or three scheduled magistrates' courts each week. In addition there are approximately two small claims/county court sittings per month. It can also accommodate occasional Crown Court business.

8.14 The distance from Enniskillen to Omagh is 26 miles takes approximately 40 minutes by car. There is a direct bus route and the journey takes approximately 60 minutes.

8.15 The illustrative calendar for the conjoined business at Omagh is set out in the table below. It should be noted that county court civil days other than calendar days are not fixed and are allocated by local judiciary based on business volumes and are therefore not detailed in the illustrative calendar. There is sufficient capacity to facilitate any increase in demand for court, tribunal or inquest sittings.

Omagh incorporating Enniskillen and Strabane					
		Courtroom 1	Courtroom 2	Courtroom 3	Courtroom 4
Week 1	1st Monday	Crown	Adult – Enniskillen		
	1st Tuesday	Crown	Adult - Omagh	Adult - Enniskillen	
	1st Wednesday	Crown	Adult – Enniskillen		
	1st Thursday	Crown	Adult - Strabane		Family - Omagh
	1st Friday	Crown	Adult - Strabane		Youth and Domestic - Omagh
Week 2	2nd Monday	Crown	Adult – Enniskillen		
	2nd Tuesday	Crown	Adult - Omagh		Youth – Enniskillen
	2nd Wednesday	Crown	Departmental – Enniskillen		
	2nd Thursday	Crown	Adult - Omagh	Departmental - Strabane	
	2nd Friday	Crown	Departmental - Omagh	Adult - Strabane	
Week 3	3rd Monday	Crown	Adult – Enniskillen		Family - Omagh
	3rd Tuesday	Crown	Adult - Omagh		Domestic – Enniskillen
	3rd Wednesday	Crown	Adult – Enniskillen		Youth - Omagh
	3rd Thursday	Crown	Adult - Strabane		Family - Omagh
	3rd Friday	Crown		Youth and Domestic - Strabane	
Week 4	4th Monday	Crown	Adult – Enniskillen		
	4th Tuesday	Crown	Adult - Omagh		
	4th Wednesday	Crown			Youth – Enniskillen
	4th Thursday	Crown		Adult - Strabane	Family - Omagh
	4th Friday	Crown	Adult - Omagh	Adult - Strabane	
Week 5	5th Monday	Crown	Adult – Enniskillen		
	5th Tuesday	Crown	Adult - Omagh		
	5th Wednesday	Crown	Adult - Omagh	Adult – Strabane	
	5th Thursday	Crown	Adult - Omagh	Adult - Strabane	
	5th Friday	Crown			

8.16 It is estimated that the closure of Enniskillen Courthouse would realise savings of £92k a year in running costs.

8.17 Strabane is currently operating as a Hearing Centre and it is estimated that the closure would realise savings of £101k a year in running costs. This is less than the savings estimated during the Hearing Centre consultation for this venue due in part to other cost savings measures which have been implemented in the interim period e.g. reduction in contract costs, reductions in planned maintenance works etc.

Question

- Q13: Are there any significant factors which you consider would preclude the any of the proposed closures in this Division?**
- Q14: If Strabane is closed, do you agree that Omagh is the most appropriate alternative court venue?**
- Q15: If Enniskillen is closed, do you agree that Omagh is the most appropriate alternative court venue?**
- Q16: Does the proposal to list Magherafelt business in Dungannon rather than Antrim give rise to any different considerations?**
- Q17: What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure and transfer of court business have on you? Please give reasons for your answer?**

9. Summary of Proposals

- 9.1 In summary, we are proposing a new configuration of court boundaries which divides Northern Ireland into three Administrative Court Divisions rather than the current seven statutory Divisions. For ease of reference we have named these Divisions:
- North Eastern;
 - South Eastern; and
 - Western.
- 9.2 Under this model each of the Court Divisions is larger than those which currently exist, but it will continue to be the case that where there are a number of court venues within a Division capable of dealing with the full range of case types, these will generally be listed at the nearest appropriate venue to minimise the travel impact for court users, in particular those reliant on public transport.
- 9.3 In some areas we present an option for Specialist Court Centres i.e. court venues which will deal only with criminal or civil and family business. Under the specialist court arrangements, the maximum travel time may exceed the 60 minute target but we welcome views from consultees whether this might be acceptable given the wider benefits that such specialist centres offer in terms of the separation of different types of business and capacity to deliver improved services and facilities at a dedicated location.
- 9.4 In essence the closure proposals seek to make maximum use of our more recently built courthouses and also those with a greater number of courtrooms and other facilities.
- 9.5 In the new North Eastern Division we are proposing that the **Old Townhall Building** would be reopened to accommodate the permanent closure of Lisburn and Newtownards Courthouses. The Old Townhall Building would be used primarily as a specialist family court centre with all other business being

accommodated within Laganside Courts. We are also proposing the closure of **Ballymena** Courthouse and transfer of business to Antrim Courthouse.

We will proceed with the previously announced closure of **Limavady** Courthouse and transfer of all business to Coleraine.

9.6 In the new South Eastern Division we are proposing the closure of **Armagh** Courthouse but we are seeking views on two options for the distribution of business.

(a) Specialist Court Centres – Under this model Craigavon will become the main Civil, Family, Youth and Tribunals Centre for the Division and Newry will be the main Criminal Court Centre.

(b) Traditional model – All Armagh court business is simply transferred to Newry

9.7 In the new Western Division we will proceed with the previously announced closure of **Magherafelt** Courthouse but, as a result of the changes to the Local Government Districts, the business will now transfer to Dungannon rather than Antrim. We also propose the closure of **Strabane and Enniskillen** Courthouses with the business being transferred to Omagh Courthouse.

10. Questions for Consultation

Questions to Consider

10.1 We would welcome responses to the following questions set out in the consultation paper –

Q1. Do you agree that in the current financial position it is right to consider the management of court business at fewer courthouses where there is a suitable courthouse within a reasonable travelling distance?

Q2. Do you consider that the reduction of the court estate will adversely impact on the community's confidence in the justice system? What, if any, steps could the NICTS take to ensure that confidence is maintained at a local level following any closures?

Q3. Do you agree that a reduced number of court locations will assist NICTS and our partner organisations to better co-ordinate and manage resources for the benefit of court users?

Court boundaries

Q4. Do you agree that it is appropriate to preserve the link between the new Administrative Court Divisions and the new Local Government Districts? If not is there an alternative model that you would suggest?

Q5. Is the proposed three Administrative Court Divisions' model as set out in Figure 3 the most appropriate? If you consider that the boundary of any of the suggested Administrative Court Divisions should be redrawn, please specify what changes you would like to see made, and give your reasons for the changes you propose.

North Eastern Division

Q6. Are there any significant factors which you consider would preclude the closure of any of the proposed courthouse(s) in this Division?

Q7. Do you support the proposal to establish Old Townhall Building as a specialist Family Court Centre for Belfast, Lisburn and Newtownards and to list criminal and youth business from these areas in Laganside.

Q8. If Ballymena is closed, would it be preferable to transfer the business to Antrim or Coleraine?

Q9. What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure and transfer of court business have on you? Please give reasons for your answer.

South Eastern Division

Q10. Are there any significant factors which you consider would preclude the closure of Armagh Courthouse?

Q11. Which option for the transfer of business within this Division are you more supportive of: Specialist Court Centres (Option 1) or Straight Transfer (Option 2)?

Q12. What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure and transfer of court business have on you? Please give reasons for your answer?

Western Division

Q13. Are there any significant factors which you consider would preclude the any of the proposed closures in this Division?

Q14. If Strabane is closed, do you agree that Omagh is the most appropriate alternative court venue?

Q15. If Enniskillen is closed, do you agree that Omagh is the most appropriate alternative court venue?

Q16. Does the proposal to list Magherafelt business in Dungannon rather than Antrim give rise to any different considerations?

Q17. What impact (positive or negative) would our proposals for closure and transfer of court business have on you? Please give reasons for your answer?

10.2 We would also welcome any comments in relation to the results of the Equality Screening Exercise and the Partial Regulatory Impact Assessment which were carried out for these proposals.

11. How to Respond

11.1 NICTS will be consulting with a wide range of consultees derived from the Department of Justice consultee list. In addition NICTS will be writing to political parties, the judiciary, the legal professions, and a wide variety of other organisations with an interest in the court system. NICTS welcomes the views of all interested parties and members of the public.

11.2 A copy of this document is available on the NICTS website (www.courtsni.gov.uk).

11.3 The last date for responses to this consultation is **18th May 2015**.

11.4 Consultation Responses should be sent to:

Email: consultations@courtsni.gov.uk

By post: Consultation Co-ordinator
Rationalisation of the Court Estate Consultation
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
Laganside House
23-27 Oxford Street
BELFAST
BT1 3LA

Telephone: 028 9041 2385

11.5 When responding, please state whether you are responding as an individual or representing the views of an organisation. If responding on behalf of an organisation, please make it clear who the organisation represents and, where applicable, how the views of members were collected.

Confidentiality

11.6 In line with the NICTS policy of openness, at the end of the consultation period copies of the responses we receive may be made publicly available. The information they contain may also be published in a summary of responses. If such a summary is published it will be made available on the NICTS website. If

you do not want all or part of your response or name made public, please state this clearly in your response. Any confidentiality disclaimer that may be generated by your/your organisation's IT system or included as a general statement in your fax cover sheet will be taken to apply only to information in your response for which confidentiality has been specifically requested.

11.7 We will handle any personal data you provide in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

11.8 You should also be aware that there may be circumstances in which the NICTS will be required to communicate information to third parties on request, in order to comply with its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Complaints

11.9 If you have any comments about the way this consultation has been conducted, they should be sent to the Head of Court Operations:

Email: consultations@courtsni.gov.uk

By post: Head of Court Operations
Rationalisation of the Court Estate Consultation
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
Laganside House
23-27 Oxford Street
BELFAST
BT1 3LA

Telephone: 028 9041 2385

Additional Copies

11.10 You may make copies of this document without seeking permission. If you require further printed copies of the consultation document, we would invite you to access the document through our website and make the 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 with your specific request.

An administrative charge may be made to cover photocopying and postage costs.

11.11 This document is available in alternative formats on request. Please contact the Consultation Co-ordinator with your request.

What happens next?

11.12 We will aim to publish a summary of the views expressed by consultees and the Department's response on the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service website within three months of the end of the consultation period.

Plans for making the results public

11.13 Decisions taken in the light of the consultation will be made public promptly with a summary of the views expressed (subject to respondents' requests for confidentiality) and reasons for the decisions finally taken.