



Northern Ireland

**Courts and  
Tribunals Service**

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# Rationalisation of the Court Estate Further Consultation on Lisburn Courthouse

*serving the community through the administration of justice*

## Document Details

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**Document Authors:**

Operational Policy Branch

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## 1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 On 29 January 2015 the Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service (NICTS) published a consultation document seeking views on proposals to rationalise the current court estate and close eight court buildings - [Consultation on Proposals for the Rationalisation of the Court Estate](#)
- 1.2 The consultation closed on the 18 May 2015 and NICTS then considered and analysed all of the responses received and the views expressed at 7 public meetings. A response and recommendation paper was published on 26 November 2015 – [Summary of Responses and Recommendations on Rationalisation of the Court Estate](#)
- 1.3 This document set out a summary of the responses received to the consultation, the NICTS response to the issues raised and recommendations as to the closure proposals. The recommendations that have been outlined are:
- the Old Townhall Building should remain closed at this time,
  - Lisburn should be closed and business transferred to Laganside Courts,
  - Ballymena should be closed and business transferred to Antrim,
  - Armagh should be closed and business transferred to Newry,
  - Strabane should be closed and business transferred to Omagh,
  - Magherafelt should be closed and business transferred to Dungannon,
  - Limavady should be closed and business transferred to Coleraine,
  - Newtownards should be retained at this time, and

- Enniskillen should be retained but designated as a hearing centre and open only on those days when a court is sitting.

- 1.4 It would be NICTS recommendation that these closures should now proceed and the Minister has indicated that he will consider these and make final decisions in early 2016.
- 1.5 NICTS is however cognizant that the recommendation in respect of Lisburn is a variation on that contained in the original consultation paper. We have therefore suggested, and the Minister has agreed, that we invite consultees to submit any further views they may have on this recommendation before a final decision is taken by the Minister.
- 1.6 This document outlines the basis for the current recommendation in respect of Lisburn and we invite consultees to consider this, in conjunction with the original consultation document and the response and recommendation document.
- 1.7 NICTS do not intend to hold any further public meetings on this matter but would encourage those who wish to respond to provide us with their views, and response to the questions outlined at section 3, in writing. A template response document is published alongside this consultation to assist respondents.

## 2. Introduction

- 2.1 This consultation paper is seeking views on the recommendation that Lisburn courthouse should be closed and the business transferred to Laganside Courts. It is therefore a short targeted consultation and will last for 4 weeks<sup>1</sup>.
- 2.2 NICTS is seeking the views on this single issue from those consultees who responded to the original consultation on the proposal for Lisburn. However we will also consider views on this issue from any other interested individuals and organisations who wish to reply. A copy of the document and the template for responses is available on the NICTS website ([www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)).
- 2.3 We invite all who read this document to approach it with an open mind and to respond to it constructively. Several questions are posed and we would be particularly grateful for views on these.
- 2.4 Please respond by 18 January 2016 to:

**Email:** [consultations@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:consultations@courtsni.gov.uk)

**By post:** Consultation Co-ordinator  
Further Consultation on Lisburn Courthouse  
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service  
Laganside House  
23-27 Oxford Street  
BELFAST  
BT1 3LA

**Telephone:** 028 9041 2385

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<sup>1</sup> The 4 week period excludes 6 working days for the Christmas period as set out in the Governments [Consultation Principles](#)

### 3. Lisburn Recommendation

- 3.1 Our initial consultation proposal in relation to Lisburn was that both Lisburn and Newtownards courthouses should close with family business from both venues transferring to the Old Townhall Building and all remaining civil and criminal business from the venues transferring to Laganside Court.
- 3.2 The proposals in the initial consultation therefore relied on the premise that the Old Townhall Building would be reopened; primarily as a specialist family court centre to facilitate the sharing of business between judges and to enhance judicial case management and disposal.
- 3.3 As part of the development of the initial proposals indicative calendars had been drawn up for Lisburn and Newtownards business transferring into Belfast. These demonstrated that there would be sufficient capacity to accommodate all of the business from both venues within the two locations in Belfast while retaining sufficient capacity to facilitate any increase in demand for court, tribunal or inquest sittings.
- 3.4 A number of respondents to the initial consultation, and particularly those who attended the Newtownards and Lisburn public meetings, raised particular concerns about the predicted savings as a result of the closures of Newtownards and Lisburn when balanced against the costs involved in re-opening the Old Townhall Building.
- 3.5 They suggested that the Old Townhall Building was not physically suitable and required substantial repair and upgrading to re-open. Respondents also noted that detailed costings for the re-opening of the Old Townhall had not been provided as part of the consultation exercise.
- 3.6 However we were conscious that this was a consultation process and that the underlying principles of the proposals had to be tested with consultees before we developed further the concept of a Family Justice Centre. We considered this an

opportunity to explore the establishment of a dedicated Family Justice Centre model in the Old Townhall Building.

- 3.7 A small number of respondents, including some working closely with children in the justice system, welcomed the concept of a Family Justice Centre. Various stakeholders also identified the need to invest substantially in the services and infrastructure within the building to ensure it was commensurate with a quality Family Justice Centre.
- 3.8 As we indicated at the public meetings we have, during the consultation process, explored the costs of establishing a Family Justice Centre in conjunction with the wider DOJ Estate Review. The initial costs estimates were in the region of £3.5m and the capital budget allocation for NICTS would not be sufficient to meet this cost and to maintain the current infrastructure programmes that the NICTS has committed to. Without sufficient capital investment we cannot at this stage recommend the re-opening of the Old Townhall Building as a Family Justice Centre.
- 3.9 On the basis of this we modified our proposals and have recommended that we continue with the closure of the Old Townhall Building at this time. This does not rule out the future use of the Old Townhall as a specialised family centre, civil justice centre or for an alternative business purpose that supports other areas within the responsibility of the Department of Justice.
- 3.10 However our recommendation not to re-open the Old Townhall Building consequently impacted on the initial proposals we had set out for both Newtownards and Lisburn. We knew from our development of the initial proposals that Laganside Court could not accommodate the business of both Lisburn and Newtownards without the additional capacity that a re-opened Old Townhall Building would provide.
- 3.11 As a result we re-considered the options available to us in relation to both venues, including looking at the scheduled sitting days, business levels and courtroom accommodation available at both Lisburn and Newtownards courthouse.

3.12 Newtownards has recently absorbed the business from Bangor hearing centre when it closed in 2013 and although Lisburn business is significant it is less than that dealt with in Newtownards. Business volumes for both venues for the past 3 years are set out below:

	2012/13		2013/14		2014/15	
	Newtownards	Lisburn	Newtownards	Lisburn	Newtownards	Lisburn
Adult Magistrates	2246	2294	3510	2162	3519	2026
Youth Magistrates	226	116	266	80	242	101
Civil Bills	763	351	885	313	912	274
Small Claims	251	8	248	12	161	10
Family	931	385	1052	368	915	377

3.13 Newtownards has four courtrooms, one of which has the ability to facilitate jury trials, while Lisburn has just two courtrooms neither of which can hold jury trials. Newtownards undoubtedly has greater scope than Lisburn, to accommodate a wider range of court business.

3.14 We developed indicative calendars which showed that, while Laganside could facilitate all of Lisburn's scheduled sitting days, it could not facilitate all of the scheduled sitting days for Newtownards. Given the number of courtrooms and therefore the scale of the indicative calendars it has not been possible to include these within this document but they can be made available separately if required.

3.15 We outlined in our response and recommendation document the comments that had been raised in relation to the original Lisburn proposal and the NICTS response to these. We don't intend to rehearse these again within this document but they can be accessed at - [Summary of Responses and Recommendations on Rationalisation of the Court Estate](#)



3.16 As our initial proposal has changed and we have recommended the closure of Lisburn and the transfer of all business into Laganside Court, we consider it appropriate to allow consultees to submit any further views they may have in relation to our revised recommendation before a final decision is taken by the Minister of Justice.

3.17 We would invite consultees to consider the following questions and to submit their views to us using the template response published alongside this document.

Q1. Do you agree that, on the basis that the Old Townhall Building is to remain closed, Lisburn courthouse should be closed and the business transferred into Laganside Courts?

Q2. What impact (positive or negative) would this have on you? Please give reasons for your answer?

## 4. How to Respond

- 4.1 NICTS will be consulting with a targeted number of consultees who responded specifically on the initial proposal for Lisburn; however we will also listen to the views of all interested parties and members of the public who may wish to comment on the revised recommendation for Lisburn.
- 4.2 A copy of this document is available on the NICTS website ([www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)).
- 4.3 The last date for responses to this consultation is **18<sup>th</sup> January 2016**.
- 4.4 Consultation Responses should be sent to:  
**Email:** [consultations@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:consultations@courtsni.gov.uk)  
**By post:** Consultation Co-ordinator  
Further Consultation on Lisburn Courthouse  
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service  
Laganside House  
23-27 Oxford Street  
BELFAST  
BT1 3LA  
**Telephone:** 028 9041 2385
- 4.5 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

- 4.6 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.

- 4.7 We will handle any personal data you provide in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.
- 4.8 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**

- 4.9 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](mailto:consultations@courtsni.gov.uk)

**By post:** Head of Court Operations  
Further Consultation on Lisburn Courthouse  
Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service  
Laganside House  
23-27 Oxford Street  
BELFAST  
BT1 3LA

**Telephone:** 028 9041 2385

### **Additional Copies**

- 4.10 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.

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

### **What happens next?**

4.12 We will aim to publish a summary of the views expressed by consultees and the Departments response on the NICTS website within one month of the end of the consultation period.

### **Plans for making the results public**

4.13 Decisions taken in 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.