

HARROW STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BOARD

22 July 2010

Draft Harrow Council evidence submission to Harrow Magistrates' Court – for consultation on courts closures

Introduction

On 23 June 2010, ministers announced proposals to modernise and improve the use of courts in England and Wales. Within the consultation were proposals to close 102 magistrates' and 54 county courts which are argued to be underused and/or inadequate. The consultation runs from 23 June to 15 September 2010.

The consultation includes the proposal to close Harrow Magistrates' Court.

On 8 July Full Council agreed a motion regarding the courts consultation, including that HSP should consider a draft response to the consultation at its meeting on 22 July.

Summary of the issue

The courts consultation argues that Her Majesty's Court Service (HMCS) currently operates out of 530 courts, some of which do not fit the needs of modern communities – their number and location do not reflect the changes in demographics, workload or transport and communication links since they were originally opened. By using courts more efficiently, it is envisaged that public money will be saved alongside improvements to services for court users.

By reforming the courts estate in line with the proposals, the following savings will be achieved: £15.3m per year in running costs and an one-off saving of £21.5m on maintenance costs.

Evidence from a Harrow perspective to inform the response to consultation is framed to reflect the 8 key principles for the courts estates rationalisation in London:

1. A magistrates' court service that geographically accessible to court users within a reasonable time
2. A structure that is sufficiently flexible to enable the work of the courts to be dealt with in a timely way
3. Magistrates' courts that provide an appropriate and safe environment
4. The judiciary must be fully engaged in the development of any plans but their independent role also respected
5. Staff should feel valued and receive appropriate training
6. Any structure must be compatible with other agencies within the Criminal Justice System
7. Any new structure must be cost effective and efficient

8. We should not feel inhibited by existing boundaries within London

A draft evidence submission for Harrow is attached. It should be noted that some sections are still awaiting more information/comments.

Proposed actions and recommendations

It is recommended that the Partnership Board:

- a) Agree that the closure of Harrow Magistrates' Court is detrimental to serving justice locally in Harrow. Board members are asked to agree that they will be united in raising objections to Government proposals and work together in lobbying for a decision to keep Harrow Magistrates' Court open.
- b) Note that the Chief Executive will be writing on behalf of the Partnership to Harrow's MPs for a high-level meeting and objecting to the proposals for closure, using the views set out in the attached document.
- c) Support that an interagency officer group be established and that all organisations are asked to support this group.