

RESPONSE TO THE CONSULTATION ON THE CLOSURE OF BLACKFRIARS CROWN COURT & WANDSWORTH COUNTY COURT

Submission by Southwark Council

Background

Reform of HM Courts & Tribunals Service

The courts and tribunals service are being reformed to meet the needs of modern day users and continue to ensure access to justice. Digital technology, online services, flexible hearing centres, and new business models will mean that fewer people will need to attend court for hearings. The courts and tribunals service say that this means they will need fewer buildings.

Reform of the court estate across England and Wales

In February 2016, the Government announced the outcome of a consultation on the provision of court and tribunal estate in England and Wales. The consultation put forward proposals to close those courts and tribunals that are underused, or that are simply unsuitable for the services which need to be provided. The decision was made to close 86 courts and tribunals over a period of two years, which, together with integrations (merging courts in close proximity) will lead to the closure of 120 court and tribunal buildings.

Blackfriars is the smallest of the three courts in the London Borough of Southwark (nine courtrooms compared with ten in Inner London and 15 in Southwark). Its location means that the site has a high-value, and the building could not easily be enlarged without demolition of the entire site. This building therefore provides less long-term flexibility than other sites we occupy. Currently, Blackfriars Crown Court predominantly hears cases which are sent from the London Boroughs of Islington and Camden (along with national work from British Transport Police and serious organised crime work). Relocating these workloads to Crown Court venues in North London, as set out in the proposal section, would be expected to have a limited impact on travel times.

Proposal

It is proposed to close Blackfriars Crown Court and Wandsworth County Court.

Wandsworth

It is proposed that the workload of Wandsworth County Court is redistributed to other courts in London, which would maintain access to justice. This would be achieved by using spare capacity in other courts.

Blackfriars Crown Court

Blackfriars is one of three Crown Court venues in the London Borough of Southwark within one mile of one another (the other two being Southwark Crown Court and Inner London Crown Court). Given that available capacity exists elsewhere in the Crown Court estate in London, there is potential to consolidate our estate in this borough to reduce running costs and improve efficiency, while ensuring that we retain access to justice.

RESPONSE

The consultation document set out a series of questions and the council response is based on a cross council response to those questions that provide information on how these closures would impact specific service areas. Consideration was given to how it would affect the work of service areas, service users, residents and any other identified stakeholders. Responses also considered any relevant equalities impacts.

1. Wandsworth County Court:

a. Do you agree with our proposals to close Wandsworth County Court?

There is no overall agreement or disagreement to this proposal. The Council attends hearings at Wandsworth only very occasionally. Officers considered any potential impact of the closure of Wandsworth County Court to not significantly impact the working of the council.

b. If we close Wandsworth County Court, what are your views on the proposed options for re-allocating the work?

If Wandsworth County Court were to close, of the proposed options for re-allocating the work the favoured option would be for the transfer of all small claims, fast & multi-track matters to Clerkenwell & Shoreditch. As stated in the consultation, the building is modern and purpose built, with good travel times and transport connections between Southwark and Clerkenwell & Shoreditch. This should cause the minimum of disruption for officers and residents in the reallocation of hearings.

c. What other options do you think might work?

No other options are suggested.

d. Would these closure and re-allocation proposals have any particular impacts for you or any group you represent?

We consider that these closure and reallocation proposals would not have any particular impacts for Southwark Council and the residents it represents.

2. Blackfriars Crown Court: a. Do you agree with our proposals to close Blackfriars Crown Court?

The majority of the council's criminal litigation is conducted in magistrates' courts and the comparatively small number of matters referred to the crown courts are usually heard at the Inner London Crown Court. Therefore the proposed closure of Blackfriars would not impact massively on the Council's criminal cases.

The consultation states that consideration has been taken of the optimum locations for hearings to be relocated to in the event a decision taken to close Blackfriars Crown Court. However consideration needs to be given to ensure that Inner London Crown Court does not become over burdened with the additional workload should Blackfriars close.

The consultation states that the building is fit for purpose and is Equality Act 2010 compliant. It makes no mention as to future use and development of the building. If the proposal to close were to progress we would strongly welcome opportunities to explore how the building could be made available for future affordable housing.

b. If we close Blackfriars Crown Court, what are your views on the proposed options for re-allocating the work?

It is proposed in the consultation document that most of the workload be relocated to Crown Court venues in North London (Wood Green, Harrow, Kingston) with some cases (those prosecuted by the British Transport Police) to the Inner London CC. As Blackfriars predominantly hears cases sent from the LB's of **Islington** and **Camden** and national work from British Transport Police and serious organised crime work, the Council considers the proposals are unlikely to have significant impact for Southwark criminal legal cases.

c. What other options do you think might work?

No other options are suggested.

d. Would these closure and re-allocation proposals have any particular impacts for you or any group you represent?

Those cases displaced from Blackfriars may impact on the Courts which the Council does use more frequently particularly Inner London Crown Court. We would welcome reassurance that other crown courts in Southwark do not become overburdened and there is no consequential impact on the timing of hearings.

3. Do you think our proposals could be extended to include other London courts?

If the proposals were extended to include other London courts there is concern that this could lead to a consequent reduction in capacity of the court system leading inevitably to delays in hearings and for residents whose cases are being delayed an appearance of justice being denied.

4. Do you have any further suggestions for improving the efficiency of the criminal or civil court estate in London?

No further suggestions at this stage.

5. Do you think we have correctly identified the range and extent of the equality impacts?

In terms of the range and extent of the equality impacts, the consultation recognises that the closure of Blackfriars Crown Court may put at a disadvantage those with the protected characteristics of disability, pregnancy or maternity because of difficulties to the extent that they need to travel further (some users may conversely travel shorter distances). However, as available data suggests that there is no over-representation of people with disabilities or pregnant women in the areas local to the courts being considered for closure the Council does not think the closure of Blackfriars Crown Court will have a detrimental effect on the health and wellbeing of Southwark's residents.

The Council generally considers that the range and extent of the equality impacts have been correctly identified although one area not considered was that of domestic abuse which it was felt could be impacted by the closure of Blackfriars CC and any consequent delays to hearings.

Do you have any other evidence or information concerning equalities that you think we should consider?

We have no further evidence or information to be considered. Ends.