Written evidence from the University of the West of England (CTS0009)

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We are concerned that the reform proposals will affect open justice in that there are further barriers preventing the reporting of the courts by local media. Closing of courts, and moving hearings online, means that it is less common to see a local reporter in the Magistrates Courts. The number of dedicated Court Reporters on local newspapers is shrinking, and given the distances reporters would have to go to listen in on an online hearing at a booth at Court can impose a further deterrent.

In January 2018, we held a project at Bristol Magistrates Court, attending every case held in open court during one week. During this period of time, only one case was attended by a reporter from local media. We fear that important work shining a light on the work of the Courts will continue to diminish.

During the project, a number of cases were conducted using video link. The positioning of the video screens in court meant that it was often difficult and, in some instances, impossible to follow the evidence being presented. Actually being present in court, researchers were able to clarify details with the CPS, something that will not be possible if the hearing is online.

Open Justice is held up to be one of the great values of our legal system. At a time when economics dictate that many local media outlets are closing or cutting back on staff, it would be detrimental to that principle if the Courts Service enacted changes to hearings that impacted further on the ease of reporting the courts.

Further information on the research can be found at conference papers given at the SLSA Conference (Bristol March 2018), at the What’s The News Conference (Brussels, December 2018), and at MeCCSA (Stirling, January 2019) and also in a forthcoming article submitted to the journal Journalism.