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HM COURTS SERVICE ESTATES

I am writing to let you know that tomorrow I will make a Written Ministerial Statement on the closure of a number of Magistrates' courts following a full public consultation.

Wells Magistrates' Court has been included in this list as it has not heard a case since January 2009, following a local review of listing practices. Before this time the court was underused with very low levels of work covering a limited range of cases, as the condition of the custody facilities made them unsuitable for use. In addition, the court did not provide your constituents, in particular witness and victims, with the modern facilities that they rightly expect.

Cases previously heard at Wells Magistrates' Court are now successfully being heard at Frome Magistrates' Court, which provides superior facilities for court users, such as safer waiting areas for witnesses and victims, and improved access to courtrooms. Relocating work in Frome has also meant that cases have been more effectively listed, with a more efficient use of judicial and staff time. Local residents have not reported any negative impact on the accessibility of justice since the relocation of work.

HMCS is continually reviewing the use of its estate to determine how it can best ensure that everyone has access to justice and that justice is provided locally. We need to ensure that we have a modern court estate that is properly aligned to where services are needed; that the estate is efficiently utilised; and that courts have the necessary facilities for victims and witnesses and to allow proper access for court users with disabilities.

A copy of the response paper will be placed in the libraries of both Houses and on the Ministry of Justice website. You may be interested to know that the consultation paper received thirteen responses, only four of which objected to the proposal.

Taking into account all responses, and the cost to the taxpayer of bringing the building up to the required standard, I believe that it remains the best option to close the court.

Yours
Truly -

JACK STRAW