



04/06

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FAMILY COURT PLANS TO GIVE A BETTER SERVICE TO LONDONERS

New style "Family Courts Centres" will be available across the capital under proposals explained in a consultation document issued by HMCS London.

The plans will lead to London providing a more integrated and consistent service, which makes more sense to the public. County and Family Proceedings Courts will be under the same roof wherever possible, so cases can easily be allocated to the most appropriate level, which is usually the Family Proceedings Court.

Area Director for London Family, Sheridan Greenland said:

" Many people are able to sort out their family issues without court intervention but where family issues require court resolution we want to provide the best possible service to Londoners".

"Family cases sometimes involve children in very vulnerable situations and we want to give these cases appropriate priority. The public will be able to access specialist family courts and administrative staff throughout the entire week and not, as at present, during a limited number of hours on specified days."

Family court users will be helped to resolve issues, wherever possible without a court hearing, by provision of access to CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) dispute resolution.

A study of workloads and travelling times has been undertaken to ensure that the proposed new network of Family Courts Centres can be easily reached. Buildings proposed provide a suitable safe environment for the sensitive nature of family cases. Under these proposals family work is usually co-located with civil work rather than crime.

If, however crime and family cases are listed in the same building they will be segregated for example separate entrances and waiting areas including children's rooms.

Family Courts Centres will be created by making better use of the existing courts estate. In some cases linked sites are proposed, which are geographically close to each other. Hearings can then be listed before the most appropriate judiciary at either courthouse, operating as if they are on one site.

Various proposals described in the consultation document have been carefully piloted at a scheme already in operation in Barnet. That initiative has shown how courts can expect to use resources more efficiently for the benefit of the public, and reduce current delays in hearing family cases.

ENDS

Notes to Editor

1. To obtain the consultation paper visit: www.dca.gov.uk/consult/confr.htm The consultation ends on 23 October 2006.
2. The consultation is principally aimed at all family court users and family judiciary in London including CAFCASS, local authorities and the family legal profession.
3. Family Court Centres will be in existing courthouses (most of them county courts) which offer the best facilities for family work, and the existing 32 venues will reduce to 15. For full details of the courts affected see the consultation document and the maps attached to this news release. The consultation is *not* about the courthouse closures: courts that no longer list family cases will continue with other types of crime or civil work.
4. The family court centre concept has been piloted in Barnet. Barnet Civil and Family Courts Centre went live on the 6 February, with staff and cases from Barnet county court and Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Family Proceedings Court (FPC) being heard by judiciary and magistracy at all tiers working together at the same location.

The pilot was set up in two stages; the first stage was to integrate Barnet FPC admin and court work at Barnet county court, which was successfully achieved in December 2005. The second stage was to integrate both Enfield and Haringey's FPC admin and court work, which was achieved at the beginning of February.

Barnet, Enfield and Haringey FPCs is now known as the North London Family Proceedings Court. The pilot will run until the end of December 2006.

5. The Government's wider access to family justice strategy is to assist citizens to resolve family disputes without recourse to courts. Education about parental rights and responsibilities and access to mediation are part of this wider strategy. Where courts are required to resolve family issues, hearings should take place at the lowest appropriate tier of judiciary. There should be greater flexibility in the use of resources and the transfer of work between judicial tiers. Parties should be able to use the same processes and procedures wherever possible across all tiers.
6. The overall proposed network of Family Courts Centres is:

Central

- Linked sites : Wells Street and Principal Registry of Family Division

North East

- Linked sites : Stratford FPC and Bow County Court
- Linked sites : Havering FPC and Romford County Court

North West

- Barnet county court
- Uxbridge county court

South West

- Linked sites: Richmond Magistrates' court, Brentford and Kingston County Court

South East

- Linked sites Croydon County Court and Croydon FPC and Bromley County Court and Bromley FPC

**For more information or an interview,
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