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FALCONER HAILS COURT BREAKTHROUGH

Courts in England and Wales are implementing new proposals for better court services - including completing cases after specified periods - aimed at improving justice for the public, the Justice Secretary announced today.

Lord Falconer, the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, disclosed today that the courts are implementing commitments – put forward by court staff themselves - to simplify and speed up the way they deliver services to the public.

The pledges include:

- Ensuring cases heard in the Crown Court are completed within 16 weeks
- Resolving child care cases within 40 weeks, reducing the stress for any children involved
- Dealing with most guilty pleas in magistrates' courts at the first hearing

The programme of improvements in court performance, called Breakthrough, is drawn entirely for the first time from changes which have been proposed by court service staff themselves, rather than being put into place centrally.

Court staff put forward proposals to improve services offered by the courts in a series of local discussions with Lord Falconer over the last six months. The Lord Chancellor has travelled throughout England and Wales to listen to the commitments which court staff believe will lead to a breakthrough in the way the courts operate.

In a further innovation, court staff have also been determined to put the Breakthrough commitments into place before any public announcement was made. So Lord Falconer's speech in the City Magistrates' Court in Manchester today is the first time that the Breakthrough programme has been made public.

Lord Falconer said: "When we launched the new Ministry of Justice last week, we said that its principal purpose was to improve services for the public. These new commitments immediately put that purpose into practice.

"These new pledges will lead to real improvements for everyone who uses the courts. They will see justice delivered much more swiftly and much more simply.

"Breakthrough in the courts is particularly important because the proposals for improvement have come directly from court staff themselves – bottom-up and not top-down reform.

"These eight specific pledges are their suggestions. My side of the bargain is to ensure they are delivered across the country. But these improvements belong to the courts themselves: they are of the courts, by the courts and for the courts."

Lord Falconer said that empowering people working in the front line was an essential element of the way the Ministry of Justice would work. He said: "Breakthrough is empowerment in action. Front-line solutions from front-line staff to improve front-line services."

The eight specific Breakthrough commitments are:

- Give greater priority and urgency to public law cases often involving issues such as whether children should be taken into care, with a view to ensuring that the matter is resolved in less than 40 weeks or such later time as the judge or magistrate deems appropriate
- Simplify and speed up criminal cases in the magistrates' courts so: most guilty plea cases are dealt with at the first hearing; most contested cases have no more than two hearings; the majority of simple charged cases take from a day to 6 weeks (on average) from charge to disposal
- Embed the underlying principles behind community justice in all magistrates' courts, ensuring local courts improve their awareness and take account of local issues, particularly when dealing with low level crime
- Encourage more families to resolve issues themselves through providing in-court conciliation or directing parties to mediation where it is appropriate and safe to do so
- Put in place systems and incentives to ensure that the vast majority of civil business is initiated online
- Provide a simpler and quicker service in the county courts through introducing a presumption that all but the most complex small claims are dealt with by way of mediation
- Reduce the time taken to deal with cases in the Crown Court, so that the majority of cases are commenced and concluded within 16 weeks
- Provide a knowledgeable, personalised and readily accessible service, keeping users informed about the progress of their case.

Sir Ron De Witt, Chief Executive of Her Majesty's Courts Service, said:

“HMCS has made great strides in raising the standard of service we deliver. But we know there is more that we can do. These eight commitments are part of a continuing drive to improve the experience of courts for our users, whether they are victims, witnesses, claimants, businesses or members of families.”

Notes to Editors

1. The Breakthrough programme has been running internally in the courts for some time, so some courts are already delivering on these pledges. For example, in Ipswich and Derby, care cases are regularly being concluded in less than 40 weeks. Magistrates' courts in Coventry, Camberwell Green, Thames and West Cumbria show that cases can be dealt with in less than six weeks from charge. And mediation cases in Manchester settle small claims quicker than those brought before a judge.
2. Any further media enquiries on this news release should be directed to Simon Steel or Michael Duncan at the Ministry of Justice Press Office on Tel. 020 7210 8643 /8803, or Mark Kram at the HMCS Press Office on 0207 340 6697.