


**SUBMISSION BY VICTORIA PRENTIS MP ON THE PROPOSAL ON THE FUTURE OF  
BANBURY MAGISTRATES' AND COUNTY COURT**

1. Introduction

- 1.1. I am the Member of Parliament for North Oxfordshire which covers the two market towns of Banbury and Bicester and 54 surrounding villages. The proposal to close Banbury Magistrates' Court is of interest to me both as the local MP, a lawyer, and as a member of the Commons Justice Committee.
- 1.2. In July 2015, it was proposed that Bicester Magistrates' Court would be closed. As the consultation document made clear, this was one of three magistrates' courts in Oxfordshire at the time; the other two were located in Banbury and Oxford. It was operating at just 11 per cent capacity. The closure has since gone ahead and the building has been transferred to Homes England for development, though work has not yet started.
- 1.3. At the time, my general support for the proposed closure of Bicester Magistrates' Court was predicated on the basis that Banbury was accessible and had capacity to support a possible surge in demand. I also suggested that alternative venues for justice, such as pubs and town halls, should be explored as part of a wider discussion about the future of the court and tribunal estate.
- 1.4. North Oxfordshire is facing unprecedented growth; with approximately three houses being built a day. Cherwell District Council are a leading housebuilder nationally. 23,000 new homes will be built by 2031. The route for the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway is yet to be decided but the National Infrastructure Commission has indicated that the preferred option would be to construct along the route of East-West Rail which passes through the area. The local population is projected to grow by an estimated 25 per cent in the coming years.
- 1.5. It is against this background that I share my views on the proposals to close Banbury Magistrates' Court. I urge the Ministry of Justice to exercise caution. The atmosphere in Banbury is febrile given the ongoing fight against the downgrade of acute services




at the local Horton General Hospital. There is considerable local disquiet about services being taken away from Banbury to Oxford, with our area being used merely as a dormitory.

## 2. Travel arrangements

- 2.1. The consultation document states that a journey from Banbury to Oxford takes approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes by car. I would suggest that this is an optimistic estimate. Having conducted my own travel survey in January 2017 as part of the local healthcare consultation, it was clear from the 450 responses that the average journey time to Oxford from Banbury or the surrounding villages is approximately 90 minutes.
- 2.2. It is not clear from the consultation document whether any consideration has been given to the lack of parking facilities at the receiving site in Oxford. Court users will have to allow additional time to find a parking space or use the city's Park and Ride facilities. Once taken into account, it is possible that a one-way journey from Banbury to Oxford could take in excess of two hours. That is certainly the time I would allow myself if travelling to a hearing in Oxford.
- 2.3. As the consultation document suggests, Banbury is also served by a regular train service to Oxford. While the train provides a realistic alternative mode of transport, the suggested 36 minute journey time does not take into account travel times to Banbury station. We have very limited bus services, and many villages are not served by public transport at all.

## 3. Oxford Magistrates' Court

- 3.1. In 2016/17, Banbury Magistrates' Court sat for a total of 2,211 hours out of a possible 3,810 available hours. This constitutes a utilisation rate of 58 per cent. Of these, 2,009 hours were spent on criminal work, and 202 on family work.
- 3.2. During the same period, Oxford Magistrates' Court had 1,184 spare sitting hours. If the plans proceed, there is likely to be a shortfall in capacity of approximately 1,000



hours. This does not take into account any increase in crime locally which we might expect with the growth in the size of the local population.

3.3. Consideration should be given to how this gap will be plugged should the plans proceed. Regular Saturday sessions or sittings beyond the usual 5-hour day should not be relied on to absorb capacity. Magistrates' undertake an entirely voluntary role; it is unreasonable to expect them to be available beyond usual sitting hours. The same is true for legal representatives. If there is an assumption that magistrates might be able to work beyond the usual hours, I would hope that the Ministry of Justice will undertake specific engagement with the relevant Magistrates' Associations to ensure all options are explored before a decision is taken.

#### 4. Alternative venues for justice

4.1. If the proposed closure proceeds, I would hope that sufficient support would be offered to develop the Banbury Magistrates' Court site. It is in a prime central location in the town and has the potential to become an important community asset. I would encourage discussion with Cherwell District Council as plans progress.

4.2. Given limited capacity at the receiving site in Oxford and the risk of over-centralisation, I would suggest that consideration is given to using Banbury Town Hall as an alternative venue for justice. Local civic venues, pubs and hotels also have appropriate facilities for court sittings. I have considerable experience as a former Government lawyer in arranging secret hearings in unusual settings. I know that many of the perceived difficulties can be overcome, and would urge that this is piloted in our area.

**Victoria Prentis MP**  
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