



Vernon Smith
Chair, Gloucestershire County Council
Shire Hall, Westgate Street
Gloucestershire
GL1 2TG

MoJ ref: ADR118201

8 November 2024

Via email

Dear Vernon,

RE: THE COURT SYSTEM IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Thank you for your letter to the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, regarding the court system in Gloucestershire. I am responding as Minister responsible for Courts and Legal Services.

On behalf of Gloucestershire County Council, you highlight concerns with the facilities and overall resourcing at Crown and magistrates' courts in Gloucestershire, make a request to extend the use of Cirencester Courthouse, and request engagement on a strategic plan for the delivery of justice in the county.

It is a priority for this Government to ensure that cases can be heard, and victims are provided with the swift access to justice they deserve. It is important that the infrastructure of our courts does not prevent hearings from taking place and that is why HMCTS officials work with our appointed estates maintenance providers, to make sure the buildings are kept safe, secure, and operational.

On the point you raise regarding courts complying with the Equalities Act, it is of course essential that everyone has access to justice, regardless of their accessibility needs. HMCTS acknowledge that there are parts of the court estate that are not fully accessible for all court users, and this is not ideal. Where buildings are not fully accessible, HMCTS puts specific reasonable adjustments in place to make sure court users can have appropriate access. This can include directing people to other accessible rooms or buildings and the use of video hearings where the judiciary agree this is appropriate.

As the Council is aware, the former courthouse in Cirencester is currently being utilised as a temporary Nightingale court venue, providing two courtrooms. Our current agreement to use the venue runs the end of March 2025. We are currently considering the case to extend its use beyond March 2025. HMCTS officials will continue to engage with the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Gloucestershire, who is responsible for the building, and further announcements will be made in due course.

As I am sure you are aware, the Crown Court outstanding caseload remains one of the biggest challenges facing the Criminal Justice System. The caseload has risen substantially over recent years as a result of the pandemic and an increase in the number of cases coming before the criminal courts.

We remain committed to bearing down on the outstanding caseload and as part of our national efforts to address this, we are funding 106,500 working days at the Crown Court this financial year (FY 24/25), more than 6 out of the last 7 financial years, and 500 more days than the previous Government originally planned. To increase capacity across the system to hear more cases, we are currently using 18 Nightingale Courtrooms across eight venues in England and Wales, including the court in Cirencester and consistently invest in the recruitment of c.1,000 judges and tribunal members annually across all jurisdictions.

The judiciary, wherever possible, look to prioritise cases that involve vulnerable complainants and witnesses (including youth cases, domestic abuse and serious sex cases). However, it is important to note that the decision on when and where a case is listed is the responsibility of the independent judiciary, and therefore not within the direct control of my Department.

HMCTS officials have advised me that staffing levels across the criminal courts in Gloucestershire, including legal resources in the magistrates' court, are all at full complement.

Finally, HMCTS officials are members of the Gloucestershire Criminal Justice Board, chaired by the Gloucestershire PCC, and this board sets and oversees the strategic plans for the delivery of criminal justice in Gloucestershire. If you consider that additional engagement would be beneficial outside of this forum, HMCTS officials would be more than happy to provide this. Please contact Christine Murray the HMCTS Delivery Director for the South-West at christine.murray1@justice.gov.uk in the first instance.

Thank you for bringing these matters to my attention and I hope my response is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Heidi Alexander', written in a cursive style.

HEIDI ALEXANDER MP
Minister Of State