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Response to **Consultation on the merger of Local Justice Areas in Wales**

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Link to consultation https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/534152/wales-local-justice-area-merger-consultation.pdf

Consultation on the merger of Local Justice Areas in Wales

The Magistrates' Association (MA) is a national charity accountable to its members with a mission to provide a voice for magistrates, support its members in administering the law and educate people on the role of the magistracy in England and Wales. The MA promotes magistrates' work, the interests of justice and the sound administration of the law. The MA has a local branch structure, and individual branches will respond to the specific proposals in the consultation document. This is a national response raising overall issues which the MA believe should be considered in relation to any proposed LJA mergers.

Question 6: General Comments

Any mergers of LJAs will obviously have an effect on potential travel times for magistrates. The MA understands the need to increase efficient use of resources in the criminal justice system, including ensuring that listing arrangements for magistrates are flexible enough. However, we would be very concerned with any changes that put unrealistic expectations on magistrates in terms of travel, especially in rural areas. Placing additional burdens on magistrates will not only have a negative impact on morale but could ultimately lead to resignations from those who are not able to travel extensive distances. Those with work or caring responsibilities may be disproportionately affected by additional travel time.

Other considerations would be the ability to dispense local justice, which in turn may have unintended repercussions on recruitment. Magistrates currently have close ties to the area in which they sit with local knowledge being a vital part of their role. Recruitment may be more difficult without a firm understanding of where a magistrate may be expected to sit regularly.

The particularities of Welsh geography must also be considered, with longer than average travel times for magistrates already being the norm. This is without acknowledging the impact of bad weather, which can make travel outside of the urban areas even more challenging.

It is important that any mergers made to increase flexibility and efficiency are done in conjunction with changes to new listing arrangements allowing magistrates more input into preferred sitting locations. This would empower magistrates to continue to sit locally and recognise that, as volunteers, magistrates views must be taken into account in relation to where they are able to sit. It is also important that listing arrangements take into account the necessity of magistrates' maintaining a full range of competences and skills.