

# **MAGISTRATES MATTER**

**A PLAN TO ENSURE MAGISTRATES  
ARE VALUED, APPRECIATED AND  
RECOGNISED**



**MAGISTRATES ARE  
VITAL TO OUR JUSTICE  
SYSTEM, BUT WITHOUT  
FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE,  
FEWER PEOPLE WILL WANT  
TO BECOME MAGISTRATES  
AND MORE CURRENT  
MAGISTRATES WILL LEAVE**

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## FOREWORD

There is a long-standing and important principle of the justice system in England and Wales: that in the majority of court cases, ordinary people – rather than those steeped in the law – are involved in deciding the outcome. In crown courts, for the most serious cases, this takes the form of juries. In magistrates' courts, which handle more than nine in ten criminal cases and a large proportion of cases in family courts too, magistrates fulfil this role.

Magistrates are central to the justice system in England and Wales. They are drawn from all walks of life – from bus drivers to bankers, from people in their twenties to those in their seventies. They have been a constant of our justice system for centuries, adapting and adjusting to meet the expectations of different ages, but always there, providing an essential public service as volunteers.

The justice system is under such strain, with record delays for crown court cases, that the consensus is that magistrate numbers need to increase sharply. As the Justice Minister with responsibility for the magistracy, Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede said in a House of Lords debate on the crown court criminal case backlog in March 2025:

“When I started as a magistrate about 20 years ago, there were 30,000 magistrates in England and Wales; there are now 14,000. We need to get the numbers back up to over 20,000 and then up again”

At the Magistrates' Association, we support this drive to increase magistrate numbers. We're working alongside the Ministry of Justice, the Judicial Office and HM Courts and Tribunals Service to encourage more people to apply to become magistrates. However, the world is changing, and fewer people are volunteering – indeed, according to NCVO (the National Council for Voluntary Organisations), formal volunteering rates have steadily declined since 2013/14.

To achieve the increase in magistrate numbers that are needed, we are convinced there must be a fundamental shift in the strategy for the recruitment and retention of magistrates – with a focus on valuing, appreciating and recognising magistrates for the unpaid and voluntary public service that they perform.

This report contains seven practical and achievable recommendations. These will make a big difference in improving the attractiveness of the role and help recruit more new magistrates as well as retain existing magistrates who would otherwise feel they must step down. There will be some cost implications from each of our proposals – but they are modest compared to the size of the justice budget, the costs of the current strain in the justice system and the value that magistrates give to the country through their voluntary service.

I recommend this report to you.

**Mark Beattie JP**  
**National Chair**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Magistrates in England and Wales are essential to local justice, handling over 90 per cent of criminal cases through unpaid service – indeed, it's fair to say that the criminal justice system would struggle to function without magistrates.

Their role is crucial, but all magistrates are volunteers, and a lack of support, financial strain, time pressures and insufficient recognition all make volunteering as a magistrate increasingly difficult. These issues stem not from neglect, but from policies that do not account for volunteers. These hidden costs and challenges of service erode magistrates' morale and increase resignations. It also makes it harder to recruit new magistrates, particularly from underrepresented groups, such as people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those aged under 35, parents or guardians of school-age children, those with caring commitments to elderly and/or disabled relatives, and people in full-time employment.

If these challenges are not addressed, fewer people will want to apply to be magistrates and the pool of sitting magistrates will become less representative and resilient.

Building on our 2022 report, 'It shouldn't cost to volunteer', this study proposes seven evidence-based recommendations to address these challenges, drawing on established best practice in volunteer management.

Our report calls for a fundamental shift in the magistrates' relationship with the justice system. A multi-year recruitment and retention strategy is essential to attract, train, support and retain magistrates while ensuring a structured transition for magistrates upon their retirement. Additionally, we call for a Magistrates'

Volunteer Charter, that would outline roles and expectations. However, without systemic reforms, the Charter risks being symbolic, so we propose two mechanisms to reinforce its impact: an annual Magistrates' Attitude Survey, modelled on the Judicial Attitude Survey, to track morale and concerns; and stronger engagement between magistrates and senior leadership to ensure their voices shape future policies. Additionally, the Ministry of Justice should formally track magistrates' volunteering hours, to quantify their contributions, strengthen the case for recognition and inform policy decisions.

Recognition must be both national and local. While some initiatives exist, such as the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire's Annual Justice Service, recognition is inconsistent across England and Wales. It is a system currently too dependent on the goodwill of individuals on the local level. We recommend that High Sheriffs and Lord-Lieutenants, as local representatives, are empowered centrally – through funding and resources – to lead local appreciation efforts to reinforce magistrates' civic contributions. Also, magistrates are the only major public service volunteers without a long service medal. Introducing a Magistrates' Long Service Medal, awarded at ten years with additional milestones, would align them with peers in voluntary public service and help to bolster morale.

The magistracy depends on goodwill, but that goodwill is finite. Without urgent reform, magistrates will continue to feel unappreciated and leave, undermining local justice. This report and our recommendations are a clear, actionable plan to enhance magistrates' engagement, retention and long-term sustainability.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Magistrates play a crucial role in local justice, but systemic changes, socio-political trends and justice system reforms have eroded their support, creating tensions that threaten the long-term sustainability of the magistracy. We offer seven recommendations grounded in robust evidence, to protect the magistracy's volunteer ethos while ensuring magistrates receive the recognition and support they need and deserve.

To ensure magistrates feel valued, supported and recognised, we propose the following reforms:

### **1. Establish a clear multi-year recruitment and retention strategy for the magistracy, across all roles**

The Ministry of Justice, HMCTS and Judicial Office should jointly develop a magistrates' recruitment and retention strategy to ensure a sustainable, well-supported and diverse magistracy. This plan should include clear recruitment targets, long-term forecasting of judicial needs and structured support for magistrates throughout their service. It should also focus on improving training, retention and career development pathways to ensure magistrates remain engaged and valued. A recruitment and retention strategy would provide the strategic oversight needed to maintain a strong, representative magistracy that meets the needs of local communities.

### **2. Develop means to capture the number of hours magistrates volunteer each year, including for additional roles taken up**

HMCTS must develop a structured, accessible system to capture magistrates' volunteering hours, to ensure their contributions are properly recorded and acknowledged. This should include additional roles they take up, such as mentors, TAAAC (Training, and Training, Approvals, Authorisations and Appraisals Committees) members and appraisers. This could be implemented through an integrated reporting tool within magistrates' existing digital systems or through a simple end-of-sitting logging mechanism. Capturing this data would reinforce the magistracy's status as a significant civic contribution, support advocacy efforts for magistrates and help inform future policies that sustain their role.

### **3. Establish a magistrates' Volunteer Charter**

A Volunteer Charter should be introduced to codify magistrates' rights, responsibilities and expectations, ensuring they have clear access to resources, guidance and support. The justice system must recognise magistrates' voluntary status and commit to supporting them in return, embedding consultation mechanisms before major policy or operational changes. This would strengthen magistrates' role as respected volunteers and reinforce their connection to the justice system.

### **4. Introduce an annual Magistrates' Attitude Survey**

The Judicial Office should introduce an annual Magistrates' Attitude Survey, modelled on the Judicial Attitude Survey and carried out at the same time, by the same organisation, and subject to the same rigour and methodology. This would provide an ongoing measure of magistrates' experiences and identify areas for improvement. It would offer a structured means for magistrates to voice concerns, ensuring their feedback informs policy decisions. Transparency is key and results should be published to demonstrate how feedback is leading to meaningful change.

### **5. Create regular, structured feedback opportunities for magistrates**

Strengthen communication and consultation and ensure magistrates' concerns are understood and addressed, by creating regular, structured engagement opportunities between magistrates, HMCTS, the Ministry of Justice and senior judicial leadership. This should work in the following ways:

- Publish survey findings – the results of the Magistrates' Attitude Survey should be made available to magistrates and judicial leadership.
- Run regular engagement sessions – magistrates at all levels should have opportunities to discuss their issues, concerns and suggestions for change with HMCTS, the Ministry of Justice and the senior judiciary.
- A 'You-Said-We-Did' model should be implemented, for policymakers to show clear actions taken in response to magistrates' feedback and concerns.

## **6. Introduce a magistrates' long service medal, awarded at ten years' service**

Current recognition efforts, such as certificates, are inconsistent and fail to reflect the scale of their contribution. A long service medal, awarded at ten years of service, with additional recognition for continued commitment, should be introduced to formally recognise magistrates' contributions. This would bring magistrates in line with other public sector volunteers who receive structured recognition for their service. In addition, such a tangible and prestigious award would boost morale, improve retention and reinforce the magistracy's value within the justice system.

## **7. Expand local recognition events**

Magistrates should be publicly acknowledged within their local communities, through recognition events led by Lord-Lieutenants. These events would acknowledge magistrates' civic contributions, helping to restore pride in their service and foster stronger local connections. They would also provide opportunities for magistrates to network and reflect on their contributions and further strengthen morale and engagement.



# CHANGES TO THE MAGISTRACY

Image: Philip Wolmuth

Over its history, the magistracy in England and Wales has undergone a number of transformations, shaped by legal, administrative and political developments. In recent decades however, systemic changes have weakened its volunteer foundations, increasingly treating magistrates more like employees than civic volunteers.

## What has this meant for the magistracy's volunteer ethos?

Over the past 30 years, structural reforms, court closures, digitisation, and external events like the Covid-19 pandemic have reshaped the magistracy, often without considering the impact on these volunteers. The abolition of magistrates' courts committees in 2005 transferred local court management to His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service

(HMCTS), centralising administration but reducing local control. And austerity measures after 2010 accelerated court closures, forcing magistrates and court users to travel further, increasing financial strain and weakening local justice.

Technology has also transformed court proceedings. The 2016 court reform programme expanded digital case management and remote hearings, improving efficiency but often overlooking magistrates' needs. Our 2022 report on Covid-19 and the courts found that these changes, while necessary, heightened stress and created barriers to fair hearings. Recruitment and retention remain continuing concerns. The Ministry of Justice's 2022 campaign to recruit 4,000 new magistrates has shown promise, particularly in improving the magistracy's diversity. However, financial support for magistrates is inadequate,

particularly for expenses and financial loss allowances. Magistrates now face professional-level expectations without the necessary support, making retention difficult.

### **The need for a long-term strategy**

Despite growing expectations, there is no comprehensive recruitment and retention strategy to support magistrates throughout their service effectively. This lack of strategy has led to inconsistent recruitment, retention challenges and a disregard for magistrates' voluntary status. Without reform, inefficiencies and inadequate support will continue to undermine the magistracy's sustainability. The next section examines these challenges at each stage of a magistrate's journey.

“Without reform, inefficiencies and inadequate support will continue to undermine the magistracy's sustainability”



# MAGISTRATES AS VOLUNTEERS: A JOURNEY OF UNRECOGNISED CONTRIBUTIONS

## The application process

The first experience many magistrates have with the system – when they apply to be a magistrate – is one of delay, poor communication and administrative inefficiency. Some applicants report waiting up to two years for appointment, with minimal engagement during the process. This lack of communication signals a failure to respect applicants' time and goodwill, discouraging them before they even begin their service.

There has been a concerted effort by the Ministry of Justice to improve this part of the journey, and to keep applicants informed through more regular updates. This is welcome and is starting to feed through, but more is needed, such as regular, personal updates of where their application is in the process.

Even before appointment, financial obstacles deter some potential magistrates, especially those on low incomes. One applicant noted:

“Some potential magistrates, during preparations to apply, may face quite expensive car parking fees when completing court observations before appointment – which they cannot claim since they are as yet unappointed.”

## Onboarding and training

The shift to virtual training has left many magistrates feeling isolated, with reduced opportunities for peer interaction and mentorship – which before the Covid-19 pandemic had been a very valuable part of the onboarding process. Instead of fostering a sense of community, the process feels

impersonal and transactional. One respondent also noted that the lack of IT training made them feel unprepared:

“I try my best, but I am not a computer/technology expert. Some of the fixes involved are challenging.”

Others described the experience as “haphazard”, with inconsistent support depending on which court they were assigned.

Remote sittings – introduced during the pandemic – have worsened this issue, leaving magistrates feeling disconnected. One magistrate commented there were:

“Fewer opportunities to get together with other magistrates (mainly because of Covid restrictions), more isolation and self-reliance.”

Magistrates are also often unprepared for the actual time commitment required. One respondent stated:

“There is a time commitment not explained in the application above the minimum 13 days sitting in the first year of appointment: training and court observations.”

Another added:

“You begin the journey as a magistrate and are encouraged to do more, such as sitting on multiple panels, mentoring, appraising... All this increases training and time commitment, plus costs.”

These hidden, extra commitments create a disconnect between expectations and reality, unnecessarily costing goodwill and making it harder to retain magistrates long-term.

## **Courtroom availability and facilities**

Magistrates frequently report poor working conditions, with outdated courtrooms, freezing retiring rooms and inadequate basic amenities. In addition, court closures have eroded the principle of local justice, forcing magistrates to travel further. One magistrate noted:

“I sit in Crawley more frequently than I used to due to the variety of work, which is 31 miles away compared to my local court which is two miles away.”

Longer travel times also mean increased fuel costs, at a time when the mileage expense rates that magistrates can claim have been reduced, leaving them out of pocket.

## **Claiming reasonable expenses**

Magistrates face delays or outright rejections of legitimate expense claims, including for mileage and childcare. The reimbursement system can be slow, bureaucratic and inflexible, failing to account for magistrates’ financial realities, and especially affects the many magistrates who work, have young children and/or are on low incomes. One respondent captured the frustration:

“We do this for FREE. How can it possibly be justified to cut the mileage allowance [from 58pence per mile to 45pence per mile in 2021 as part of an expenses review] under these circumstances?”

Another magistrate, who relied on their parents for childcare, found that:

“There was no way to claim expenses, so they’ve ended up donating a lot more than their time to enable my volunteering.”

## Magistrates Matter: a plan to ensure magistrates are valued, appreciated and recognised

For some, this financial strain has led to resignations. One magistrate noted:

“Some magistrates have resigned over this and I don’t blame them. I’m considering resigning myself.”

### Sitting and preparation

Family magistrates in particular spend significant unpaid time preparing for hearings, only to face last-minute cancellations or scheduling issues. This means magistrates often wait for hours in court without productive use of their time and it is particularly disruptive for those who need to take time off work or organise childcare every time they sit in court, or who have caring or other volunteering responsibilities. As one magistrate noted:

“We are a resource whose time is often wasted. Perhaps wasted time should be monitored better.”

Another described how:

“We are expected to read far too much before attending court the next day – often four or five bundles with many attachments – only to be told that the hearing cannot proceed.”

New digital platforms have often made matters worse, with poorly managed rollouts and inadequate training. One magistrate told us:

“It feels like HMCTS are shifting admin work on to the justices, to save money.”

### Balancing the role with life

For magistrates who also work full-time, balancing employment with judicial duties is becoming increasingly difficult due to a lack of central guidance and employer support. The Magistrates’ Association’s young magistrates’ network found

that magistrates under the age of 40 struggle with employment conflicts and do not feel supported in understanding their rights.

One respondent pointed out:

“There is excellent work ongoing within the Ministry of Justice to implement recommendations on support for employed magistrates... but magistrates still face significant difficulties in securing time off work.”

By contrast members of the Army Reserve are paid a daily rate (£63.27), with new officers earning (£99.60). After a year they are paid an additional £558 ‘bounty’. The bounty increases to over £2,200 after five years, tax free.

Managing court sittings is a task compounded by last-minute court cancellations by HMCTS, or days finishing at lunchtime, which means only half a day is recorded. Despite this, a magistrate will have taken a full day off from paid employment or other commitments. For magistrates who are already struggling to maintain their minimum sittings, and for those whose travel times to and from court is more than an hour, this is particularly detrimental.

### Recognition

One of the top reasons magistrates resign is the lack of meaningful recognition. While magistrates serve the justice system without financial compensation, many feel their work is overlooked.

As one magistrate said:

“We are volunteers, not employees. But we are treated like unpaid lackeys.”

Another pointed out that even long service awards feel dismissive, saying:

“Paper certificates for 20 years of service – photocopied very unprofessionally. That’s all.”

## Magistrates Matter: a plan to ensure magistrates are valued, appreciated and recognised

In contrast, after ten years of service, members of the Army Reserve can be nominated for the King's Volunteer Reserves Medal (KVRM). Special constables also receive a medal after ten years' service. There is no similar recognition for magistrates.

### Retirement

Finally, magistrates who retire – frequently having served diligently and professionally for 20, 30 or even more than 40 years – receive no formal acknowledgment, either that they have retired or of their service. One respondent said:

“The lack of provision to thank JPs who retire is completely non-existent.”

Instead of a meaningful farewell, magistrates are cut off from communication. Their judicial email accounts are deleted as soon as they retire, with no support provided on their exit from the role. This reinforces the perception that their decades of service are unnoticed and unappreciated.

### The impact of this on magistrates' morale

This systemic failure creates a gulf between magistrates' volunteer intentions and the reality of their experience. The role is presented as a civic duty that can be balanced alongside other commitments, yet magistrates find themselves burdened by hidden costs, excessive demands and a lack of recognition.

As the data below, from our 2022 report 'It shouldn't cost to volunteer', shows, magistrates are committed to their role and understand its importance, but instead of feeling valued for their service, many feel alienated, overworked and underappreciated by a system that treats them as unpaid professionals rather than respected volunteers. This has knock-on

effects across the system and other volunteer roles within the magistracy, making it less likely, for example, that a magistrate will take on leadership roles. Other impacts are shown below:

99.5%	Strongly agreed with the statement <b>"I feel committed to do my job well"</b>
98%	Agreed or strongly agreed with the statement <b>"I feel I provide an important service to my community by being a magistrate"</b>
83%	Agreed or strongly agreed that they were <b>satisfied with the role</b>
76%	Said they <b>would still join the magistracy, knowing what they know about the role now</b>

66%	of magistrates who've considered resigning before the mandatory requirement of age 75, reported <b>not feeling valued as their main reason</b>
51%	felt that the role had either <b>"totally changed"</b> or <b>"seen significant change"</b>
43%	Thought that <b>change had worsened their experience as a magistrate</b>
22%	Agreed or strongly agreed with the statement <b>"I feel adequately consulted about any changes that affect my role as a magistrate"</b>
36%	Agreed or strongly agreed that there is a <b>lack of information about legislation and policy that affects magistrates</b>

57%	Disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement " <b>I feel valued by Government</b> "
48%	Agreed or strongly agreed that they felt <b>valued by senior leadership in the magistracy</b>
43%	Disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement " <b>I feel valued by HMCTS</b> "

In summary, the magistracy is at risk of long-term decline due to inconsistent recruitment, poor retention and a lack of support across the lifecycle of the magistrate role. Many magistrates leave due to a lack of structured support, while the recruitment process does not attract or retain a sufficiently diverse and sustainable pool of volunteers. We are concerned that there is no recruitment and retention strategy to support magistrates throughout their service in a way that meets their needs, as well as long-term judicial needs. Without a structured approach, magistrates' morale will continue to decline and the system will struggle to maintain its essential function in local justice.

In addition, there is currently no mechanism to formally track or quantify the number of hours that magistrates spend volunteering. This omission significantly undervalues magistrates' contribution, makes it harder to build a case for greater recognition and investment in the magistracy, and makes it impossible to make well-informed policy decisions about how best to support them.

### Recommendation 1

The Ministry of Justice, HMCTS and Judicial Office should jointly develop a **magistrates' recruitment and retention strategy** to ensure a sustainable, well-supported and diverse magistracy. This plan should include clear recruitment targets, long-term forecasting of judicial needs and structured support for magistrates throughout their service. It should also focus on improving training, retention, and career development pathways to ensure magistrates remain engaged and valued. It would also provide the strategic oversight needed to maintain a strong and representative magistracy that meets the needs of local communities.

### Recommendation 2

HMCTS must develop a structured, accessible system to capture magistrates' volunteering hours, to ensure their contributions are properly recorded and acknowledged. This should include additional roles they take up, such as mentors, TAAAC (Training, Approvals, Authorisations and Appraisals Committees) members and appraisers. It could be implemented through an integrated reporting tool within magistrates' existing digital systems or through a simple end-of-sitting logging mechanism. Capturing this data would reinforce the magistracy's status as a significant civic contribution, support advocacy efforts for magistrates and help inform future policies that sustain their role.

## **LEARNING FROM THE LITERATURE: RECOGNISING AND SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS**

To restore pride in the magistracy, policymakers must learn from what works in understanding and managing the motivations of a volunteer workforce. Effective volunteer management principles provide a blueprint for achieving this, offering insights into motivation, retention, and the structures needed to sustain long-term engagement.

In addition to the findings of our member magistrates surveys, we reviewed the literature to find examples of best practices that could strengthen the magistracy. We looked at external research on volunteer motivation, retention and recognition - which highlights the importance of structural support, meaningful recognition and strong community ties in sustaining volunteer engagement.

Appendix 1 has more information on our literature review and what we found.

The overarching need for a volunteer recruitment and retention strategy for the magistracy has already been covered in the report. This report will now take the remaining five recommendations in turn.

# RESETTING THE RELATIONSHIP THROUGH A VOLUNTEER CHARTER



AI generated

In our October 2022 report, 'It shouldn't cost to volunteer', we recommended creating a Volunteer Charter – a formal agreement between government departments, agencies, and magistrates' representatives, designed to promote greater respect and understanding of the magistracy as a volunteer institution.

A Volunteer Charter would be a fundamental step in changing the relationship between HMCTS and magistrates. It would be a comprehensive document outlining the principles, behaviours, and practices that should guide interactions between magistrates and the institutions that rely on their service.

The literature review is clear: when volunteers feel equipped to handle their responsibilities and see a path for personal growth, they are more likely to stay committed. A well-defined Charter would ensure magistrates are treated fairly and

consistently, with clear mutual expectations and appropriate support mechanisms.

### Recommendation 3

A Volunteer Charter should be introduced to codify magistrates' rights, responsibilities and expectations, ensuring they have clear access to resources, guidance and support. The justice system must recognise magistrates' voluntary status and commit to supporting them in return, embedding consultation mechanisms before major policy or operational changes. This would strengthen magistrates' role as respected volunteers and reinforce their connection to the justice system.

## Magistrates Matter: a plan to ensure magistrates are valued, appreciated and recognised

The Magistrates' Volunteer Charter would serve three key functions:

1. Establishing clear expectations – defining the rights and responsibilities of magistrates while clarifying what they, in turn, can expect from HMCTS, the senior judiciary and the Ministry of Justice.
2. Ensuring that the HR infrastructure is robust and accessible to those who need it – providing a consolidated repository of guidance, procedures, and points of contact to help magistrates navigate challenges in their role.
3. Recognising and valuing magistrates' contributions – embedding mechanisms for appreciation and ongoing support, fostering a culture of respect and belonging.

### What should the Charter include?

A robust Volunteer Charter must go beyond symbolic recognition and provide magistrates with practical guidance and tangible commitments from the justice system to ensure their role remains sustainable.

1. Mutual expectations The Charter must reinforce the principle that volunteering is a two-way relationship - one that requires commitment not just from magistrates, but from the justice system as a whole to support, respect and retain them. It should clearly outline the mutual expectations that govern the relationship

- Magistrates are expected to:
  - Fulfil their judicial responsibilities with professionalism and integrity
  - Participate in ongoing training and development

- Adhere to a clear code of conduct and ethical guidelines.

- Magistrates can expect:
  - Financial fairness – they should not be out-of-pocket for their service, with expenses reimbursed efficiently.
  - Consultation before major changes – magistrates should be consulted, as soon as practicable, on policy shifts or operational changes that impact their role.
  - Recognition of service – their contributions should be acknowledged through meaningful and consistent forms of appreciation
  - Essential resources and support

2. The Charter must address key procedural and support needs to ensure magistrates feel equipped and valued. In addition to the above, a Magistrates' Volunteer Charter should include:

- A structured induction and settling-in process, ensuring magistrates receive sufficient initial training
- A code of practice and clear guidelines, clarifying responsibilities and expectations
- Ongoing training and professional development, keeping magistrates updated on legal changes and best practices
- Defined support and supervision structures, including reasonable adjustments for those with specific needs
- Procedures for handling difficulties, ensuring magistrates have clear avenues for raising concerns or seeking help

- Transparency on who to contact for guidance on policies, well-being and other issues.

However, the Charter would not be a contract. Magistrates are not employees, and their voluntary role must remain distinct from salaried positions. To mitigate this perception, the Charter could state that it is not legally binding.

Volunteer-involving organisations that are transparent about the voluntary nature of the role – and that reimburse only out-of-pocket expenses – do not risk creating employment status simply by setting out clear expectations. Many established public service volunteer roles already operate within structured frameworks without undermining their voluntary status. The Charter must follow this model, ensuring that magistrates are supported without altering the fundamental nature of their role.

### Bringing the Charter to life

A Charter that exists only on paper will not resolve the systemic issues of recognition and support. The Magistrates' Volunteer Charter must be a dynamic framework that actively enhances magistrates' experience – ensuring they feel supported, valued and engaged.

To be effective, the Charter must:

- **Be implemented in practice** – magistrates should see tangible improvements in support and treatment.
- **Undergo regular evaluation** – structured feedback and data collection should assess its impact.
- **Ensure accountability** – those responsible for policy and operations must uphold its commitments.

We recommend two key measures to achieve this: i) a Magistrates' Attitude Survey and ii) structured feedback mechanisms with HMCTS.

#### i) **A Magistrates' Attitude Survey**

There is currently no systematic way to measure the experiences and morale of magistrates. Unlike salaried judges, who have their views assessed through the Judicial Attitude Survey, magistrates have no equivalent platform to express their concerns and provide structured feedback.

This data gap means policymakers are making decisions without an understanding of the challenges that magistrates face. As we showed in 'Magistrates as volunteers: a journey of unrecognised contributions', page 12, magistrates report feeling disregarded, neglected and undervalued by HMCTS, the Ministry of Justice and senior judicial leadership – a situation that undermines morale and retention.

#### **Case study: the Judicial Attitude Survey**

The Judicial Attitude Survey, conducted by University College London, is an anonymous annual survey that gathers insights from salaried judges. It examines:

- Job satisfaction and workplace conditions
- Workload and stress levels
- Views on judicial independence and morale.

Its findings have been instrumental in shaping judicial policy and improving conditions for salaried judges.

#### Recommendation 4

Introduce an annual Magistrates' Attitude Survey, modelled on the Judicial Attitude Survey and carried out at the same time, by the same organisation, and subject to the same rigour and methodology. This would provide an ongoing measure of magistrates' experiences and identify areas for improvement. It would offer a structured means for magistrates to voice concerns, ensuring their feedback informs policy decisions. Transparency is key, and results should be published to demonstrate how feedback is leading to meaningful change.

#### ii) **A structured feedback loop: ensuring magistrates' voices lead to action**

Measuring attitudes alone is not enough – magistrates must also see that their feedback is heard, valued and leads to real change.

#### **Case study: Canal & River Trust's 'Cuppa and connect' model**

Canal & River Trust, a major volunteer-led organisation responsible for maintaining historic waterways, has developed a highly effective model for volunteer engagement.

Their quarterly 'Cuppa and connect' sessions:

- Provide a regular and relatively informal forum for volunteers to discuss their concerns directly with leadership
- Use a 'You-Said-We-Did' approach to show how feedback translates into action

- Strengthen trust between volunteers and leadership, improving morale and retention.

A similar approach within the magistracy – such as twice-yearly engagement sessions with HMCTS and judicial leadership – would ensure magistrates have clear opportunities to engage with decisionmakers, and to see their concerns leading to meaningful change.

#### Recommendation 5

Strengthen communication and consultation, and ensure magistrates' concerns are understood and addressed, by creating regular, structured engagement opportunities between magistrates, HMCTS, the Ministry of Justice and senior judicial leadership. This should work in the following ways:

- Publish survey findings – the results of the Magistrates' Attitude Survey should be made available to magistrates and judicial leadership.
- Run regular engagement sessions – magistrates at all levels should have opportunities to discuss their issues, concerns and suggestions for change with HMCTS, the Ministry of Justice and the senior judiciary.
- A 'You-Said-We-Did' model should be implemented, for policymakers to show clear actions taken in response to magistrates' feedback and concerns.

## THE CASE FOR A LONG SERVICE MEDAL

Magistrates play a fundamental role in the justice system, handling over 90 per cent of criminal cases and dedicating years – often decades – of unpaid service to their communities. However, despite their critical contribution, magistrates currently receive minimal formal recognition, with only certificates (sometimes a poor-quality photocopy or electronic PDF) awarded at ten, 20 and 30 years of service.

Research on volunteer retention and morale (see literature review, Appendix 1) consistently shows that meaningful recognition is a key factor in sustaining long-term volunteer commitment. Without clear, structured recognition, there is a risk of declining retention and disengagement – particularly at a time when recruiting enough magistrates from different walks of life and backgrounds, is already a challenge.

At the 2023 Annual General Meeting of the Magistrates' Association, our magistrate members overwhelmingly voted in favour of establishing a long service medal, recognising the need for more tangible, structured recognition in line with wider public service practice. A medal would reward magistrates for their long service and by officially acknowledging their years of service, help raise morale and support the retention of experienced magistrates.

### The 'recognition gap'

Long-service recognition is a standard feature across the public sector, particularly for volunteers who take on roles of public responsibility. However, as this table shows, magistrates are the only major group of public sector volunteers who do not receive a long service medal:

<b>AMBULANCE SERVICE</b>	Medal after 20 years' service
<b>CIVIL SERVANTS</b>	Certificates after 10, 20 and 30 years' service and for lower grades the imperial service medal and citation after 25 years' service
<b>FIRE SERVICE</b>	Medal and certificate after 25 and 35 years' service
<b>MAGISTRATES*</b>	<b>Certificates after 10, 20 and 30 years' service</b>
<b>NATIONAL CRIME AGENCY</b>	Medal after 20 years' service
<b>NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE</b>	Medal after 25 years' service
<b>POLICE COMMUNITY SUPPORT OFFICERS</b>	Medal after 20 years' service
<b>POLICE SERVICE</b>	Medal after 20 years' service
<b>PRISON OFFICERS</b>	Medal after 20 years' service
<b>REGULAR ARMED FORCES</b>	Medal after 12 years' service
<b>RESERVISTS OF THE ARMED FORCES</b>	Medal after 10 years' service
<b>ROYAL NATIONAL LIFEBOAT INSTITUTION*</b>	<b>Certificate after 5 and 10 years' service and a medal after 20, 30, 40, 50 and 60 years' service</b>
<b>SPECIAL CONSTABLES*</b>	Medal after 10 years' service
<b>ST JOHN AMBULANCE VOLUNTEERS*</b>	Medal after 10 years' service plus a bar every 5 years thereafter, gilded and gold
<b>TOWN CRIERS*</b>	Medal after 25 years' service

\*unsalaried

This is a missed opportunity to reinforce the magistracy as a prestigious and valued volunteer-led institution.

### **Recommendation 6**

Current recognition of magistrates, such as certificates, are inconsistent and do not reflect the scale of their contribution. A long service medal, awarded at ten years of service, with additional recognition for continued commitment beyond 10 years, should be introduced to formally recognise magistrates' contributions. This would bring magistrates in line with other public sector volunteers who receive structured recognition for their service. In addition, such a tangible and prestigious award would boost morale, improve retention and reinforce the magistracy's value within the justice system.



# RECOGNISING MAGISTRATES LOCALLY

While national recognition efforts are essential, recognition must also happen where magistrates serve – in their local communities. Magistrates play a unique role in delivering justice at a local level and their recognition should reflect that. Bringing recognition closer to home reinforces the civic nature of their service and ensures that appreciation is felt directly and meaningfully.

There are already pockets of good practice in magistrates' recognition and we commend the excellent work being done in some areas (see two examples given below). However, recognition of magistrates varies significantly by region, with some areas providing structured appreciation while others offer little to no acknowledgment of service. We recommend that existing good practice is amplified and made more systematic across England and Wales, ensuring that all magistrates have access to meaningful local recognition.

To achieve this, we propose two key steps:

1. Expanding and formalising local magistrates' recognition events, to ensure every magistrate has the opportunity to be acknowledged locally or regionally for their service.
2. Empowering public figures, particularly Lord-Lieutenants, to take a more active role in magistrates' recognition – paying tribute to the history and heritage of the magistracy.

While magistrates' recognition is not yet widespread, there are notable examples of good practice that should be expanded and replicated.

One example is the magistrates' recognition event at the Old Bailey in autumn 2023, which brought together magistrates from across

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England and Wales in a prestigious setting. Attended by the Lord Chancellor, the Lady Chief Justice and other senior figures from the government and judiciary, this event provided magistrates with a rare opportunity to be publicly acknowledged by key decision-makers.

Similarly, the High Sheriff of Hertfordshire's Annual Justice Service serves as a more localised model of recognition, celebrating the contributions of those who administer justice in the county. Events like this reinforce magistrates' sense of belonging, ensuring that their service is acknowledged by the communities they serve.

These two examples also demonstrate that recognition is more meaningful when it is embedded within the traditions and structures of the justice system. Magistrates are part of a long history of civic service and recognition events should reflect that.

### **Empowering Lord-Lieutenants to celebrate magistrates' contributions**

Recognition events should not be public-facing in the sense of a large-scale public event, but they should still be led by public figures – ensuring that magistrates' contributions are acknowledged at the highest levels of local governance.

Lord-Lieutenants, as the King's local representatives of justice, are ideally placed to play a greater role in recognising magistrates' service. They are a fitting symbol of continuity and heritage, making them natural champions for magistrates' recognition. By hosting formal recognition events for magistrates, Lord-Lieutenants would:

- Restore pride in the role – magistrates would be reminded of their place within the wider tradition of civic service, reinforcing the prestige and significance of their work.

- Reinforce the magistracy as an integral part of the justice system – ensuring that magistrates' contributions are recognised alongside other key figures in law and order.
- Create opportunities for magistrates to connect – magistrates rarely get the chance to meet one another outside the courtroom; recognition events would help build networks and strengthen morale.

These events would also serve a wider purpose helping to engender public appreciation for the magistracy, even if they are not directly open to the public. Public figures leading these events would signal that magistrates' service is valued at the highest levels of civic leadership.

This would build on existing best practice, ensuring that effective recognition efforts are expanded rather than replaced. It would guarantee consistency in recognition, preventing it from being left to chance or dependent on local goodwill. And it would greatly enhance magistrates' connection to the justice system, reinforcing their role as a valued and integral part of civic life.

### **Recommendation 7**

Magistrates should be publicly acknowledged within their local communities, through recognition events led by Lord-Lieutenants. These events would acknowledge magistrates' civic contributions, helping to restore pride in their service and foster stronger local connections. They would also provide opportunities for magistrates to network and reflect on their contributions and further strengthen morale and engagement.

## CONCLUSION

For centuries, the magistracy has stood as a cornerstone of local justice, upheld by the dedication of volunteers who give their time, expertise and commitment to ensuring fairness in our legal system.

However, while the justice system relies heavily on magistrates' goodwill, it has failed to match this reliance with adequate support, recognition or meaningful engagement. This imbalance has left magistrates feeling undervalued, disconnected and, in many cases, disheartened with a system that appears to take their service for granted.

This report has laid out the urgent case for change. The magistracy cannot be taken for granted – it is sustained by goodwill, a resource that is neither limitless nor guaranteed. Without structural recognition, clear expectations and robust support mechanisms, we risk losing experienced magistrates and deterring future volunteers from applying to become magistrates.

The recommendations outlined in this report are practical, achievable and necessary. They do not seek special treatment for magistrates but rather a fair and structured approach to recognition – one that aligns with best practices in volunteer management and public service.

If implemented, these recommendations will rebuild magistrates' morale and engagement, ensure magistrates feel valued and supported throughout their service and create a sustainable foundation for the future of the magistracy. It will impact its identity and diversity positively in all ways, and for the benefit of all who wish to join this most rewarding role.

These recommendations are not about privilege – they are about fairness, sustainability and respect. If we are to safeguard the future of the magistracy, then the justice system must act now to recognise, support and invest in the volunteers who uphold it.

The magistracy has been described as 'a democratic jewel beyond price' – it is time it was treated as such.

## APPENDIX 1: LEARNING FROM THE LITERATURE: RECOGNISING AND SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS

This literature review explores three key themes from academic research on volunteer management and motivation, linking them to the magistracy:

### 1. Volunteers need more than motivation – they need infrastructure and support

While intrinsic motivation – such as civic duty and personal fulfilment – plays a role in magistrates' willingness to serve, research is clear that motivation alone is insufficient for long-term retention.

#### The limits of motivation in sustaining volunteers

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation (1966) provides a useful framework for understanding volunteer satisfaction. Herzberg distinguishes between:

- Motivators: factors that encourage engagement, such as personal growth, a sense of achievement and meaningful work
- Hygiene factors: conditions that prevent dissatisfaction, such as fair policies, clear communication and supportive infrastructure.

Research consistently finds that poor hygiene factors – such as inadequate support, bureaucracy, and lack of clear expectations – drive volunteers away, regardless of their motivation (Hager & Brudney, 2004).

In the magistracy, these hygiene factors include:

- Lack of clarity on magistrates' rights and entitlements, particularly regarding expenses and time commitments
- A growing administrative burden, with magistrates expected to absorb new digital processes without adequate training
- A failure to consult magistrates on major changes, leading to frustration and disengagement.

Magistrates increasingly report feeling like unpaid professionals rather than respected volunteers, with duties expanding but recognition and support not keeping pace. This is mirrored in broader research on volunteer retention, which finds that roles that become overly bureaucratic and burdensome, experience higher dropout rates and lower satisfaction (Garner & Garner, 2011).

#### Addressing the structural gaps in volunteer support

Academic research suggests that formalising volunteer roles with clear policies, structured feedback and stronger organisational support, increases engagement and retention (Wilson, 2012). For magistrates, this means:

1. Transparent and well-communicated policies on expectations, expenses and entitlements

2. Regular consultation mechanisms to ensure volunteers feel heard and valued
3. Improvements in accessibility and usability of digital resources to reduce administrative burden.

Without these fundamental support structures, magistrates risk burnout, disengagement and resignation, weakening the sustainability of the system.

## 2. Recognition and respect are essential for retention

Research consistently finds that volunteers who feel unappreciated are significantly less likely to continue in their roles. Recognition is not merely a symbolic gesture – it plays a direct role in reinforcing volunteers’ sense of purpose, legitimacy and social belonging.

Tse et al. (2020) found that ‘felt respect’ – the degree to which volunteers feel valued by the organisation – predicts long-term volunteer retention. Volunteers who felt respected and recognised were more likely to continue for ten to 20 years, while those who felt undervalued left significantly sooner.

For magistrates, respect is often undermined in small but significant ways:

- Exclusion from basic judicial privileges, such as flu vaccinations
- Lack of formal recognition for years of service, despite the high demands of the role
- Minimal public awareness of magistrates’ contributions, reinforcing a sense of invisibility.

These gaps align with broader research showing that volunteers who feel treated as second-class contributors disengage more quickly (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008).

Deci et al. (1999) caution against over-reliance on extrinsic rewards (eg. external rewards and praise), noting that poorly designed reward systems can undermine someone’s intrinsic (personal) motivation. However, well-structured recognition – such as public acknowledgments, awards and symbolic gestures of appreciation – enhances volunteers’ commitment and sense of belonging.

For magistrates, this literature suggests that recognition should:

- Celebrate service milestones in meaningful ways, not just through impersonal certificates or just a medal
- Ensure magistrates feel part of – and both understood and respected by – the broader judicial community
- Be continuous, rather than sporadic, reinforcing magistrates’ value at all stages of their service.

Sustained recognition efforts contribute to higher morale, stronger loyalty and lower dropout rates among volunteers (Wilson & Musick, 1999).

## Connection and belonging strengthen commitment

A sense of belonging is one of the strongest predictors of volunteer retention (NCVO, 2023). Volunteers who feel part of a supportive and connected community are more likely to remain engaged, even in demanding roles.

## **The erosion of connection in the magistracy**

Historically, magistrates operated in tight-knit local communities, reinforcing their role as a trusted part of the justice system. However, recent changes – including closures and the centralisation of courts, remote hearings and a loss of in-person gatherings – have weakened these bonds.

Research on volunteer management finds that:

- Isolation reduces volunteer commitment (Haski-Leventhal et al., 2008).
- Opportunities for informal social connections increase engagement (NCVO, 2019).
- Regular, structured feedback loops prevent disengagement (Hager & Brudney, 2004).

In the magistracy, this suggests that restoring opportunities for connection – both among magistrates and between magistrates and the wider judiciary – would strengthen morale and retention.

## **Strengthening social and organisational ties**

Studies on volunteer engagement recommend creating structured, recurring opportunities for volunteers to connect with each other (Wilson, 2012). This is particularly important for magistrates, whose work is often isolating and emotionally demanding.

Successful strategies in other sectors include:

- Regular local sessions to share experiences and concerns

- Symbolic events that reinforce volunteers' status and contribution
- Improved digital platforms that allow for easier interaction and engagement.

Research supports the idea that volunteers who feel part of a meaningful collective effort are more likely to stay, even in challenging circumstances (Haski-Leventhal, 2008).

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