

FAQ: Reform of Local Justice Areas (LJAs)

Overview of the reforms

1. What is the overall purpose and rationale for abolishing LJAs?

The decision to abolish LJAs relates primarily to the need to modernise our enforcement of financial penalties and the way that we handle enforcement of our transfers of community orders and suspended sentence orders. Untying magistrates' court administration from legislation will remove restrictions on the administration of this work, which will have a major impact in terms of time saved for court staff.

2. What is actually changing?

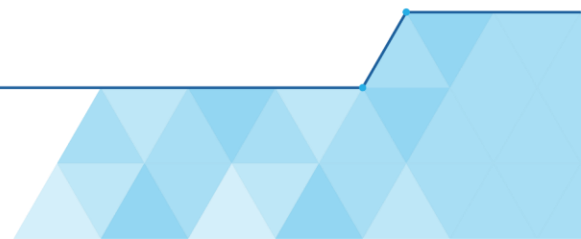
Once LJAs are abolished in law, the current 75 geographic boundaries will continue to exist, but in an administrative form, rather than as legal boundaries. The decision that has been made, following consultation, is that the current 75 geographic boundaries will remain exactly as they are but will be known as benches. No mergers are being made, and we do not expect widespread reassignment of magistrates. While the vast majority of magistrates will continue to sit where they do now, there may be some individual changes linked to home-court deployment or personal circumstances.

3. Why are the 75 boundaries being kept?

During the consultation, many magistrates said that the originally proposed larger areas could lead to longer journeys, loss of local identity and difficulties with leadership structures. Keeping the current boundaries avoids those issues and maintains continuity for benches and their local communities.

4. Does this mean LJA reform has stopped?

No. The statutory abolition of LJAs will still happen. The difference is simply that the new benches will have soft boundaries (contrasting with the hard legal boundaries of LJAs), allowing for greater ease in moving case work, fines, community orders, and suspended sentence orders between courts in different groupings. But benches will continue to match the current geographic boundaries, rather than combining them.



Travel, Sitting Patterns & Deployment

5. Will I need to travel further?

We do not expect magistrates to face increases in typical travel under the new arrangements. Retaining the 75 existing boundaries means magistrates will continue to sit where they do now, with typical travel patterns remaining broadly the same. Magistrates will continue to have a home court where they undertake the majority of their sittings.

As happens now, magistrates may be asked to sit in other courts within their bench to meet business need. This reflects longstanding practice in many areas and is not a new expectation. Sittings outside the bench would remain limited and discussed with the magistrate and local leadership in line with existing arrangements.

6. Will I have to sit in other courts?

Magistrates will sit mainly at their home court, but in line with current practice may also be deployed to other courts within their bench. Any sittings outside the bench would remain exceptional and by agreement, and only where business need requires it.

7. How will a magistrate's home court be decided?

We have proposed that existing magistrates would be assigned to the court in which they have sat most frequently over the past 12 months as their 'home court'. Newer magistrates may be assigned a home court based on their home or work address.

However, we recognise that this may not be suitable for all magistrates (for instance, if an existing magistrates' sitting pattern over the past 12 months had been influenced by capacity constraints or case variety). Therefore, magistrates will be able to discuss home court assignments with their Bench Chair with the potential to agree a more suitable home court location (subject to this meeting business need).

8. You have reduced the upper limit of travel time from 90 to 60 minutes – but is it fair to expect volunteer magistrates to travel 60 minutes to court?

As now, the vast majority of journeys are expected to continue to be between 15 and 60 minutes, with journeys longer than this being the exception. We appreciate that travel time varies in different places and can depend on public transport schedules or traffic conditions. Every effort will be made to avoid long journey times as far as possible.

9. In a bench with only one court, will 100% of sittings be at that court? What if the court does not have enough business to cater for these magistrates?

If that court offers sufficient variety of work for a magistrate to gain competence across all relevant areas, then this could be the case. However, the answer will depend on what that court is able to offer. We know that many magistrates enjoy the experience of sitting in other locations or handling a variety of different cases.

10. What happens to reasonable adjustments?

Nothing changes. As is currently the case, every effort will be made to accommodate reasonable adjustments for magistrates with a disability, long-standing illness, and/or

flexible working requirements. Arrangements will be agreed locally. If you would like to discuss reasonable adjustments, you should contact your Bench leaders locally.

Recruitment & Diversity

11. Will keeping the boundaries help recruitment?

In the response to the consultation, some concerns were expressed that larger areas could have deterred some applicants — particularly those with caring responsibilities, disabilities, or limited transport options. Keeping the familiar boundaries avoids creating new barriers.

12. What is happening to improve diversity?

We continue to make progress in building a magistracy that better reflects the communities it serves. Recent recruitment rounds have seen increasing diversity among both applicants and those appointed, reflecting the impact of targeted outreach and inclusive marketing. Ensuring the magistracy is representative of society will remain a priority as we recruit more magistrates.

Welsh Language

13. What does this mean for Welsh language provision?

We are committed to the bilingual provision of court services in Wales, and to the equal treatment of Welsh and English in Welsh magistrates' courts.

Strong concerns were expressed, through the consultation, about the implication of proposals on Welsh-speaking magistrates and court users. We have reviewed this feedback carefully and adjusted our final proposals accordingly.

A full Welsh Language Impact Test has been published alongside our final proposals which finds that, by maintaining the current 75 geographic boundaries exactly as they are, there will be no new impacts for Welsh language provision.

Equalities

14. What did the updated Equalities Assessment conclude?

It found no significant equalities impacts from retaining the current boundaries and making minimal changes to sitting expectations.

15. How will magistrates with protected characteristics be supported?

As now, deployment decisions will take personal circumstances into account, and if you have concerns you should raise them with your Advisory Committee Secretary. The final approach involves no significant expansion of travel or changes to sitting expectations, which reduces potential negative impacts.

Leadership & TAAACs

16. Will the leadership roles be elected or selected?

There was a clear preference among respondents to retain the current system of electing local bench chairs and their deputies, and we therefore do not propose any change to this approach. However, steps such as providing clearer role descriptions, making the role more manageable, and encouraging more magistrates to gain leadership experience through deputy positions will be explored to help make these roles more attractive.

17. Is the Bench Chair role changing?

No. The role will remain a single position. Bench Chairs will continue to be supported through the use of Deputies.

18. Are TAAACs being reduced to 14?

For now, there will be no reduction. Any future changes to administrative groupings would only happen with local consultation. Judicial College Learning Partners will, however, become statutory members to strengthen training links.

Expenses & Support

19. Will I be out of pocket under the new arrangements?

Magistrates should not be out of pocket for carrying out their duties. The magistrates' expenses framework is currently under review to ensure it remains fit for purpose, and a public consultation will follow.

Questions not covered here?

If you have further questions after publication, please contact
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