

These comments are written on behalf of the Church and Society Division of the Presbyterian Church of Wales. We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence and comments on the document.

The Division supports the principles and aims outlined in the document.

Please see the responses below which refer specifically to the questions in the document:-

Question 2

The various barriers noted make it difficult for defendants, witnesses and the public to gain easy access to the legal system, which can lead to a lack of confidence in the system. This includes access to affordable legal advice within reasonable distance from their homes. Further challenges are noted below:-

- (a) The costs involved in travelling to courts and information centres due to centralisation. People face difficulties in accessing public transport services. People living in isolated rural areas find it difficult to access the internet in order, for example, to source information provided by the government.
- (b) People face huge technical barriers in some parts of Wales. We should remind ourselves that most of these areas do not have public transport services and have been affected by local government cuts, for example the closure of public libraries which provide access to the internet.
- (c) Geographical expanse and the impact of so many court closures are barriers to accessing justice. It is difficult for witnesses and defendants to travel to court. This, in turn, can be a barrier to witnesses. Detailed consideration should be given to the challenges faced by families who travel to hearings in care centres in terms of childcare, and the lack of public transport services available to reach the court in the morning and return later in the afternoon.

Question 3

The biggest challenge is accessing services in the first place, partly due to the barriers noted above. Bilingual services are also needed. Distance also poses a challenge for people living in rural Wales who wish to visit prisoners. Furthermore, there are no women's prisons in Wales. This has a detrimental effect in terms of keeping families in touch with each other, and this can affect relationships with children.

Question 4

Better information is needed with regard to the solicitors who offer Legal Aid. The shortage of legal firms providing this service is a source of frustration. We need to ensure that offices providing legal services are available in all areas.

Question 5

Devolution has had a positive impact. Access to High Court provision etc is welcomed. This work should be escalated in order to look at further decentralisation and the establishment of organisations in Wales. The higher courts, including the Supreme Court, should hold regular meetings in Wales with the aim of ensuring that all cases from Wales are heard in Wales.

Question 6

The role of local authorities needs to be clarified. The independence of the legal system should be respected. We must remember that local government is the prosecutor in many criminal and civil proceedings. Local government should not be given an advisory role. However, public services should offer support to families, young offenders etc and provide preventative services.

Question 8

With increasing division between Welsh and English law, Wales and England should have separate sentencing systems. This is a continuation of decentralisation and a natural step following separation. Judicial training should be provided in order to ensure consistent sentencing in Wales.

Questions 11 – 13

University curricula should be appropriate and attractive. Furthermore, access to professional qualifications should be available in more than one location in Wales. The justice system needs to be given sufficient funding.

Currently, people are unable to access courts which are close to their homes and are unable to travel to courts within a reasonable timescale. Better digital and bilingual provision is needed. Students must be encouraged to study the subject, but careers officers need to provide better information on the opportunities available. An improved budget is required for legal aid.

Response on behalf of the Presbyterian Church of Wales

3/6/18