Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from Shane McKechnie

Arbroath Sheriff Court

I write with reference to the above and to voice my disappointed that the closure of Arbroath Sheriff Court is even being considered. I attended the meeting held in Arbroath on 17 May in relation to this matter and have heard the sums of money which require to be spent on Forfar Sheriff Court and Arbroath Sheriff Court to bring each of these buildings up to the required standard. I cannot believe it is even being considered spending the vast amount of money on Forfar Sheriff Court when Arbroath already is of a high standard and already has many of the facilities in place which Forfar would require to obtain.

As I understand it, Arbroath has facilities in place for vulnerable witnesses and these are used on a regular basis. Arbroath also have access to Angus Women’s Aid and Victim Support, who both have offices in Arbroath. I understand Forfar have neither of these facilities. It would be unthinkable for a vulnerable witness to have to travel on public transport to attend court, especially as that would mean travelling on the same public transport as possibly the accused, other witnesses and jurors.

On the issue of public transport, I understand it costs in the region of £6.40 return from Arbroath to Forfar on a bus (there is no other mode of public transport from Arbroath to Forfar). That is a substantial amount especially for those who are in receipt of benefits. This could possibly mean that witnesses decide they cannot afford to travel and therefore will not turn up to court, which in turn would mean the Sheriff issuing a warrant for that person to be brought to court. That in turn would involve the police effecting the warrant, which is time consuming and not a cost effective exercise for the police to carry out – being yet another waste of tax payers money!

Further, consideration should be given to the difficulty in accessing Forfar in bad weather. Over recent years Forfar has almost been cut off from Arbroath and the surrounding area and thus public transport has either been stopped or limited. Although the same can be said for people living in the Forfar area having to come to Arbroath, the population of Arbroath is much larger and therefore it does not make sense to move the largest amount of work to the town with the smaller population. Arbroath also has a train service which means people from Montrose, Dundee etc can still attend Arbroath court despite many days of bad weather.

I also understand that Arbroath has a larger turnover of cases in all levels ie civil business, criminal actions and Children’s Hearings. Again, having children attend Forfar Sheriff Court from Arbroath would cause difficulties, as that is an extra cost to a family who are in receipt of benefits, which they can ill afford. There would also be difficulties for parents attending Forfar Sheriff Court if they have children at school. The bus from Arbroath to Forfar to allow access to Forfar Sheriff Court at 10.00 am,
leaves Arbroath at 8.05 am. What are families supposed to do with children until the start school at 9.00 am, if they have to leave town at 8.05 am?

Taking into account the facilities Arbroath Sheriff Court has in place and the facilities available to vulnerable witnesses, that Arbroath has a larger population than Forfar, Arbroath is far more accessible for people using public transport from the surrounding area than Forfar, Arbroath Sheriff Court has a larger amount of cases on all levels and a smaller amount of money requires to be spent on Arbroath – I cannot see any logic whatsoever in closing Arbroath court.

There is also the question of the knock-on effect to local businesses in the area who rely on Arbroath court ie cafes, paper shops. These are all independent, often family run, businesses who can ill afford to lose any more business, given the current climate. If Arbroath court was to close, this may also see the end of these businesses. Of course there would also be a knock-on effect to local solicitors, who rely on local clients for their day to day running. Arbroath has seen a huge decline in recent years with many businesses closing down. The closing of Arbroath court would be the final nail in the coffin.

Shane McKechnie
20 May 2013