Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from John Leith

The proposed closure is a backward step in an age when we have been looking to localise decision making and make the law and Government more relevant to people in their local area. In the “Kingdom of Fife” there has been a long history of defending local representation and local administration. Just as Scotland takes pride in having its own distinct history – in legal affairs as well as broader issues, so the population in Fife is in favour of keeping administrative and legal functions close to home.

I read the Report and was not really impressed with the reasons for closure. There was too much emphasis on the standard of accommodation required for users of the facilities as opposed to the convenience of local users of the facilities. It also came across very much as a product of short termism. Alright, I accept that we are in a period of economic difficulty that has resulted in the Chancellor cutting back severely on expenditure. There are arguments against what he is doing and in a couple of years’ time another Government may address matters differently and, indeed, the economic climate may change for the better.

People think courts and think of crime and criminals, but the courts deal with victims of crime, they deal with ordinary citizens going about their business – people with family issues like divorce, contact, adoption, cases regarding children, mental health, debt, as well as people who have suffered bereavement and want to have the deceased’s affairs put in order for widow or children. It means a lot for these “customers” to have things dealt with close to home – in their own locality. Make no mistake, transferring the court business of Cupar Sheriff Court to the City of Dundee is a major change and upheaval for the people (and voters) of North East Fife.

The expense of travelling to Court will rise significantly. Employees will require more time off work and that will have an economic impact.

Access to local justice will be lost

The taxpayer will have to foot the bill for police travelling further to spend longer in court.

Bus journeys of 2 hours or so will be required for less well off or elderly “coasters”.

There will be days when closure of the bridge will result in longer journeys, more wasted time and more cases being postponed.

Cupar Sheriff Court sat in excess of 250 days last year – hardly a part time court.

Cupar Sheriff Court generates £200,000 of fees each year.
The local police are moving in next door to the Court – this must mean savings as well as convenience.

The local court has modern equipment and excellent facilities.

There will be a negative economic effect on the town of Cupar.

The local knowledge of a locally based Sheriff pays dividends and provides continuity of approach – ask retired Sheriff George Evans whom I feel sure will endorse that.

I believe there is alleged backlog maintenance estimated at £470,000. I have grave doubts about the credibility of this.

I have not heard one word in favour of the closure of Cupar Sheriff Court and I doubt if the Committee will hear such voices. Whatever your politics, we have seen in recent years how having a local Parliament has benefited the people of Scotland. As a solicitor, I have seen how matters regarding Scots law have been modernised out of all recognition since devolution took place. Let us not throw a portion of that good work away by the retrograde step proposed here. Let us keep justice close to home where it will receive more respect and will continue to benefit the local population.

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