Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from Graham Webster

My submissions are particular to the proposal to close Arbroath Sheriff Court and are submitted as a concerned individual and citizen in Arbroath, having attended the public meeting held in Arbroath last Friday evening, which was attended by members of the Justice Committee.

Question 1.
What will be the local impact of the SCS’s recommendations on access to justice?
I would like to put forward the following for consideration:

- It is a regressive step to close the building and facility, which could lay dormant for some 3 years prior to purchase.
- It will take some 20 years to recover funds.
- Arbroath Sheriff Court serves some 55,000 people, whilst Forfar 25,000. If any of the 2 Angus Courts to close it surely makes more sense to maintain the largest town in Angus, near to which the bulk of the population reside and not to switch all business to Forfar because someone may like the look of the building. This is an attempt to save £1.3M per annum, equalling the unpaid fiscal fines.

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- In the initial Future Court Structures in early 2012 Forfar Sheriff Court was proposed for closure under the Low volume criteria. In the Dundee Courier and Advertiser of 1 September 2012 it was reported that the axe may be due to fall on Arbroath Sheriff Court. This information was released and confirmed at the start of the consultation period, some 21 days later. 1 of the SCS ideals is to adopt transparency and openness. Staff at Arbroath still await an acceptable/reasonable explanation for the change of position.
- Centralisation hits more small towns and local communities.
- Trial delays will increase as it is planned only to hold Summary Trials 2 days per week, compared to 3 days at present. Justice delayed is justice denied.
- It would require a huge Capital Investment to save a few pounds in the Revenue budget.
- Local justice must be just that and delivered locally.
- By closing Arbroath is this the start of centralisation of everything to Dundee, given the fact that Dundee is near to capacity at the moment and it is proposed that Dundee absorb the work of Cupar Sheriff Court?
- The general public are concerned about the time taken for Criminal and Civil cases to complete at the moment. If Arbroath Sheriff Court were to close the delays would increase. Justice delayed is justice denied.
- Criminal Justice presently employs 32 people in Angus, 30 in Arbroath and 2 in Forfar, some 15 miles inland, with no train service.

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Question 2.
What will be the local impact on the court users of the SCS recommendations?
On Friday 17 May 2013 there was a public meeting in Arbroath, the panel including Holyrood justice committee vice-chairwoman Jenny Marra, committee colleague Alison McInnes and fellow MSPs Alex Johnstone and Graeme Dey.

The local impact is as follows:

- It will rip the heart out of the community.
- Local justice should be delivered **locally**.
- Centralisation hits more small towns and local communities.
- The public meeting was attended by some 60 people, representing Court staff, the Police, Criminal Justice, Witness Service, Women's Aid and Age Concern.
- Mr Bruce Thornton, Witness Service addressed the meeting and stated that Vulnerable people have the right to justice in their own community, conform to the recent **EEC directive**. One such person said to him last week that his father and brother attended ASC and he was not going to Forfar. By putting him on a bus to Forfar, along with potential accused, other witnesses, jurors and members of the public, this would have a detrimental effect on if and how he gives his evidence, given that he would have to make the return trip on the bus following the Court. To deny him this right would be a **breach** of his **Human Rights**.
- The main transport links are north/south by rail and bus, whilst the trip to Forfar is on a B-class road prone to being blocked by snow in the winter. By putting all on the same bus to and from Court, including a 15 minute walk from stance to Court would create a time bomb. What does the driver do in the event of disruption on the bus? Where will the police come from given that they are to report to the witness rooms in Forfar?

And remain there for the duration as opposed to being on the beat in Arbroath on stand-by as a witness.

Over the last 15 years Arbroath has covered the Custodies cases for Forfar on many occasions, this only being reciprocated for the recent Easter weekend Custody Court.

I request the above information be considered with a view to placing before a Full Committee of the Scottish Parliament to annul the closure order proposed for Arbroath Sheriff Court.

Graham Webster
20 May 2013