Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from Peter M Blyth

I would like to write to express my extreme disappointment at the proposed closure of Haddington Sherriff Court.

I am a Panel member on the East Lothian Children’s Panel and have served on this for over 19 years. We sit locally in Tranent and provide a valuable service to the young people in the county in need of help and support. It is of significant benefit to the local community in having the service locally-based in terms of providing a service that is tailored to the specific needs of the community we live in. We have close ties with many groups in the community who we interact with as part of our duties. One of these groups is the Sherriff Court and it is my view that closing the court in Haddington will have a hugely detrimental effect on the service that families and young people in desperate need of help will receive by having to travel to large and impersonal courts in Edinburgh. Many of these families are the most deprived in our locality and could not afford the expense of travel to Edinburgh. I also feel that a great number will now no longer attend proof hearings and appeals which we as panel members feel will only increase with the implementation of the 2011 Children’s act on the 24 June. The East Lothian Children’s Panel appreciate the close business working relationship that we have with our local Sherriff and have had a continual dialogue over the many years of my involvement for the betterment of local families, it would not be expected that this would be the case if the court was moved to the capital. By way of example just on Monday night past we had an excellent joint training session with the Local Authority Social Work team, also attended by Sheriff Peter Braid, where we discussed the particular challenges around permanency planning and adoption. Having Sheriff Braid’s input was invaluable to us and has amended our practices.

Aside from the impact on local families there are many other reasons for retaining the court service in Haddington. The court is a key part of the town, which is already suffering from the impact of out of town supermarkets and centralisation of other services. There is a lot of work going on locally to improve footfall in the town, be it improving transport links, improving local markets, and various other initiatives. Closure of the court will undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on other services, aside from the obvious ones such as directly impacted services such as local solicitors and procurator fiscal offices. With less solicitor cover the already fragile legal aid availability will be further reduced and make it more cumbersome for families to get the vital legal representation they need.

I also understand that commercially the business case to close the court in no way stacks up, and indeed find it amazing that offers from the Local Authority to help fund repairs of the court building have been turned down.

I trust that the Justice Committee will see sense prevail when making its decision and retain this valuable service.