Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from Kate Black

Cupar Sheriff Court

I am writing to you principally as a resident Letham, Fife (being of one of the rural communities that is served by Cupar Sheriff Court) but also as a solicitor practising in Cupar, to record my concerns with, and opposition to, the proposed closure of Cupar Sheriff Court.

I would urge the Justice Committee to reject the proposal for closure by the Scottish Court Service (SCS). I would question the financial credibility of the proposal and believe it ignores the needs of a wide spread rural community to have access to justice within its own constituency.

The arguments advanced by those seeking to save the Court are already well known and have been commented on by our elected representatives as compelling reasons for retaining the Court. Those arguments can be summarised as follows: -

- The Court “sat” the equivalent of 257 days last year which rebuts any suggestion that it is under utilised and merits it remaining open
- Projected savings from the closure (net of dilapidations which is only a paper accounting entry) account for only £38,000 per year out of SCS’s hoped for savings of £1.43m per year. Such a tiny saving does not justify dismantling the local justice system in North East Fife
- The backlog maintenance claim of £470,000 for Cupar from SCS is not credible when compared with an average of £12,000 per year spent over the last five years (£51,000 of which was spent on the one-off refurbishment of the Sheriff Clerk’s office)
- The "one-off" transfer costs of £91,000 in moving to Dundee and the alleged "savings" on closure rings even more hollow
- Cupar Sheriff Court generates fees of around £200,000 per year which must offset its running costs
- Cupar is/will be a fully integrated service (like Livingston) comprising Court, Police and Social Services all under one roof
- Cupar has been invested with catering facilities paid for by Fife Council, a vulnerable witness suite and up-to-date technology
- All those attending Court will face longer and more costly journeys, whether to Dundee or Kirkcaldy
- Police, Expert Witnesses and Social Workers will have to take more time away from work to attend Court if Cupar is closed
- There will be an devastating economic impact on Cupar as many wages and salaries dependant on the Court will be spent elsewhere
• One Sheriff sitting in a County Sheriff Court such as Cupar provides continuity of approach and benefits from local knowledge and deals with cases at every stage as espoused by retired Sheriff George Evans

• As a single “summary” Sheriff Court (possibly subsuming the JP Court and extending the Court boundary to include parts of Glenrothes) Cupar could absorb work from the already overstretched Kirkcaldy Sheriff Court.

These arguments were put to SCS’s management at the Public Meeting held in County Buildings, Cupar, (which I attended). The response to which seemed only to be that savings need to be made to SCS’s budget and it seemed clear that a decision had already been made by SCS.

A decision to close Cupar Sheriff Court will affect the whole of North East Fife which has been served successfully by Cupar Sheriff Court for hundreds of years.

I shall be grateful of your confirmation that the arguments put forward above and the impact on the community that Cupar Sheriff Court serves have been fully considered and further that the purported savings given by SCS have been properly verified.

Kate Black
20 May 2013