Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from Regina Erich

As a Stonehaven resident I am aware that Stonehaven Sheriff and JP Court is proposed for closure. I am writing to you to express my concerns and to urgently ask you to decide for annulment so that the issue can debated and considered in Parliament.

The arguments put forward in order to justify the closure of Stonehaven Sheriff Court (as far as they were publicised in the press) were mainly based on cost saving and the proximity, availability and accessibility of the court in Aberdeen.

At a recent public meeting in Stonehaven I listened to the detailed evidence of senior members of the legal profession, all of whom have a sound and indisputable insight into the likely impact of closing the local court in Stonehaven and moving all business to Aberdeen. From this it became obvious that the projected cost saving of 50k per annum achieved by the closure of Stonehaven Sheriff Court needs to be put in perspective to the ensuing expenses. It also became clear that the facility in Aberdeen is far from providing the dignified and appropriate environment required in sensitive cases. It also emerged that the numbers published for the case load dealt with in Stonehaven and Aberdeen respectively don't match the actual situation. Furthermore, there were concerns regarding the growth in population (for example, the 8,000 homes development in Elsick between Stonehaven and Aberdeen which will be completed after the proposed closure of Stonehaven Sheriff). Why take an existing, long established and operational service away when there will be a foreseeable increased demand for this service in the near future? It also emerged that, due to the location of Stonehaven Sheriff Court, police and social services could act more swiftly and efficiently through the local court service than through a remote service in Aberdeen.

All of this calls for a forensic consideration of the true impacts for the people who live here, if Stonehaven Sheriff was to be is closed. I therefore urgently ask you to take all available expertise into account and don't dismiss or ignore information from professionals who truly know the situation.

I would also like to highlight equality issues, for example travel times and transport to Aberdeen for people who are vulnerable due to age, illness or impairment, or for people with children.

Finally, on a personal note, I strongly feel that Stonehaven Sheriff and JP Court is part and parcel of public life in our area – a notion that is shared by everyone to whom I have spoken about the issue. There is also widespread concern that Stonehaven will lose its police station in the wake of a closure of the court, which would mean another nail in the coffin of community life in our area.
The present Scottish Government promises to make Scotland “a fairer place to live”. Please help that this promise can be filled with life! Please decide against a proposal that would take away one of the very institutions that ensure Scotland remains a society worth living in!

Regina Erich
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