Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from Sacro

Background
Sacro is a voluntary organisation which provides a wide range of diverse services across Scotland. The key areas of work focus on Mediation, Youth Justice, Criminal Justice Services and Self-Directed Intensive Support Services. In practice, this means that practitioners work in a number of different settings. This includes engaging young people, addressing anti-social behaviour or helping find solutions to neighbourhood disputes and conflict as well as addressing the harm caused by offenders in relation to domestic abuse and sexual offending. Sacro works with victims also.

Question 1 What will be the local impact of the SCS’s recommendations on access to justice?

It is our view that it is very important to keep a focus on community justice, whereby, justice is about offenders, victims and involves local communities. While, it is understood that the current financial climate, necessitates some of the outlined court closures, it will also be important to keep a sense of local ownership and participation in the process of justice. It is reassuring to note that future investment is planned in respect of facilities for jurors, victims and witnesses, as well as investing in communication technology. The process of preparing for and attending court can be very stressful for the aforementioned groups, therefore travel to an unfamiliar area may have an unintended adverse effect on individuals.

Question 2 What will the local impact be on court users of the SCS’s recommendations?

A number of the service users with whom Sacro work will be offenders, victims and witnesses. It is often the case that our service users are also vulnerable. The closure of certain courts will mean additional travel, cost and inconvenience. In the light of the new “welfare reforms” being introduced across Scotland, there is likely to be increased financial pressures on families, making travel arrangements difficult or impossible. The concern is that some individuals may choose not to turn up for court due to the travel involved, which may then lead to warrants being issued and compound difficult circumstances. There is the potential for an increase in the use of remand, should offenders and other court users fail to attend court. Many of our service users are young and immature and/or have complex health needs and other challenges. The planned changes to court structures at least for some individuals will cause some hardship.

In more rural areas where court closures are planned and public transport is irregular, then it may be challenging to be able to turn up to court for a 10am start. Could the court, under certain circumstances consider a later start or could transport be arranged from more rural communities in order to arrive on time at court? Clearly,
people have a personal responsibility also in order to get themselves to court. Again, the idea is welcomed of court users being able to attend at a local community resource and by utilising technology, make it possible for them still to be able to attend court, even if it is on a "virtual" basis.

Sacro
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