Justice Committee

Scottish Court Service recommendations for a future court structure in Scotland

Written submission from Christine J Burns

I wish to urge you to vote for an annulment on the closure of Stonehaven sheriff court. There are number of reasons i would hope this would happen.

The proposal is to move all Stonehaven sheriff court business to Aberdeen. This will increase the work load and need for capacity in Aberdeen where there is already chronic overcrowding with witness and victims often having to share the same space - this of course leading to disruptions. In the overcrowded court in Aberdeen it is difficult if not impossible for legal representatives to consult with any degree of privacy with their clients - this will only be a problem that will be exacerbated with an increase workload.

There is also the danger of solemn cases becoming summary due to length of time of cases coming to court. This is surely a dilution of justice and indeed may result in many summary cases not going to court at all. It is my understanding that Aberdeen court cannot keep up with the number of cases it deals with now so again the closure of Stonehaven sheriff court seems impractical.

Stonehaven sheriff court has the capacity to deal with jury cases while still functioning as a sheriff court. Indeed historically jury cases have been sent to Stonehaven court for the very reason it can cope with numbers involved in jury cases while still dealing with more minor cases. Again I find it difficult to understand how the closure of this rural justice building could result in any short or long term financial saving but would appear to add to the financing of an overcrowded and overburdened Aberdeen court.

Stonehaven sheriff court has capacity as stated for jury and ongoing legal business. It also has capacity to accommodate for vulnerable young people, adult, children and disabled people. These groups usually require carers, companions or parents to attend with them. I have witnessed first-hand the chaos within Aberdeen court buildings when there has been a jury case in session while other cases are being heard and frankly it was like living in a chapter of Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. Again Stonehaven can accommodate increased vehicular traffic within its streets and increased personnel within its sheriff court without increasing the purse from public sources.

The proposed closure of rural sheriff courts does not bode well for rural communities such as Stonehaven. The court building holds an historical importance to the town and is where people from Stonehaven and surrounds see justice being done. There is also the fear if the court goes Stonehaven will also lose its police station.

I urge you to support a vote of annulment on the proposed closure of Stonehaven sheriff court. It has capacity, is central to this rural community, can function both at jury and sheriff level. A vote for annulment will allow the full economics of these
proposals to be looked at in more depth and I would think would indicate short term saving perhaps but long term loss.

Christine J Burns
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