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Dear Mr Gray

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS S4W-04703, S4W-04704 and S4W-04705 – FUTURE COURT STRUCTURES

The Cabinet Secretary in his response to the above Parliamentary Questions indicated that they relate to operational matters within the responsibility of the Scottish Court Service corporate body. I am now writing to you in response to the matters you have raised.

S4W-04703

Whether the Scottish Court Service plans to close Haddington Sheriff Court?

The Scottish Court Service (SCS) currently has no plans for court closures. As set out in our Corporate Plan 2011-14, published in April 2011, we are considering what structures and accommodation are needed by the courts, court staff and court users in future and how we can provide these as efficiently as possible.

Recommendations within Sheriff Principal Bowen's review of Sheriff and Jury business, Lord Gill's review of the civil courts and the recent report by Lord Carloway, anticipate significant changes to how and where court business is conducted. One feature of the recommendations is greater specialisation and a move away from the model where all types of business are conducted at all court locations. Looking ahead, the use of modern communications technology has the potential to change the way in which some court proceedings are conducted. We expect to carry out an increasing number of transactions – such as the payment of fines – online or by telephone, where previously people might have expected to come to a public counter.

We began our discussions on court structures internally within SCS, with the judiciary and with other justice bodies to stimulate ideas and to ensure we understood what would be the important issues that would need to be addressed in developing any proposals. In these discussions, we asked for views on the following questions:

- Supreme Courts: Could the High Court circuit be reduced and, if so, where should it sit?
- Sheriff & Jury business: Could Sheriff and Jury cases be consolidated into fewer centres and, if so, where should they be?

- Fewer buildings in the same town: Could we manage with fewer buildings where we have more than one in any town or city?
- Fewer courts: Could we manage with fewer courts where we have more than one within a reasonable travelling distance?

We wrote to a wide range of stakeholders – including all local authorities, Victim Support Scotland and Consumer Focus - in September 2011 and again in December 2011, setting out these questions and our intention to engage with them during 2012 to help to test our initial thinking and eventually develop proposals for court structures that would meet current and anticipated future needs. If any proposals for court closures were to emerge from this discussion process, they would then be subject to full public consultation and final decisions would be for the Scottish Parliament.

S4W-04704

Whether the Scottish Court Service has been asked to draw up plans for saving money by closing sheriffs courts?

No. Like other public bodies, SCS has already faced reductions in its budget and there will be further reductions over the next three financial years. The SCS Board has set out a programme of work in the Corporate Plan 2011-14 across five broad, strategic areas: improving the efficiency of our internal processes; maximising the opportunities offered by technology; making better use of our buildings; developing the skills of our staff and collaborating with other Justice bodies to achieve system-wide improvements. Final decisions about how to balance savings across the SCS budget will be taken by the Board, informed by the views of the Lord President and Sheriffs Principal, who have statutory responsibility for the efficient disposal of court business.

S4W-04705

What consideration it gives to the needs of local communities when considering changes to the local court network?

The needs of local communities are an important part of our thinking on future court structures and, if proposals are developed, this element will be fully explored in discussion with stakeholders and in a full public consultation.

A copy of this letter will be placed in the Scottish Parliament Information Centre and published on the Scottish Court Service website.

Yours sincerely



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