



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Sailesh Vara MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice
102 Petty France
London
SW1H 9AJ

1 October 2015

CONSULTATION SUBMISSION TO COURT CLOSURES

Dear Sailesh,

I am writing to put forward my arguments to keep North Avon Magistrates Court open following the consultation into the provision of courts and tribunals services in England and Wales.

North Avon Magistrates Court, also known as Yate Magistrates Court falls in my constituency of Thornbury and Yate. This is an issue I feel strongly about and would be very grateful if these considerations were taken into account during the consultation.

North Avon Magistrates Court is not in the county of Gloucestershire it falls under the jurisdiction of South Gloucestershire Council, and unlike the consultation suggests, it is the only Magistrates Court in the district.

One of the main advantages to Yate Magistrates Court is its free parking, this is something that no other court in the area has. There is also a bus and train station within one mile of the precinct. If it were to be closed, facilities would be transferred to Bristol.

For my constituents needing to attend court, this would incur additional cost, both in terms of financial cost, which is a particular concern for people on low incomes, but also in terms of time, as it can often take upwards of an hour to reach Bristol by public transport, the means of transport most people would depend on, during peak travel times.

Those individuals who need to travel by public transport, particularly from rural areas (a large proportion in the area), will be most affected as their journeys to court may be longer and more expensive, especially for those that need to take their children along with them.



According to ONS data from the 2011 census, Yate is ranked as 18,159th most deprived out of 32,482 neighbourhoods, whereas Bath comes in at 22,422nd. Given that crime is often more prevalent in more deprived neighbourhoods, I hope you can appreciate the importance of retaining this vital asset where ONS figures demonstrate it is most needed.

The consultation does not seem to have taken into account the rural areas with infrequent public transport, and the fact that in some cases claimants requiring multiple modes of public transport, thus increasing journey time.

Elderly and disabled or vulnerable individuals will also find it more difficult to navigate the public transport network, and there is a danger that many will be not attend court cases as a result of this. Closure of Yate Magistrates Court would mean that vital that access to justice is maintained for the most vulnerable in the local area.

As a result, many cases may be delayed or cancelled due to individuals arriving late or failing to attend altogether. As this is designed as a cost cutting measure, the incidence of cases not being heard will result in additional costs to Her Majesty's Court and Tribunals Service, and prove contrary to what the closure is designed to do.

Currently, the operating costs of Yate Magistrates Court is £285,598 per annum. The costs of Bath Magistrates and County court is almost double at £453,184. If looking at this forma purely financial point of view, more savings would be made if Bath Magistrates and County Court were closed.

Furthermore, the staffing costs at North Avon are more than £200,000 lower than Bath, at £407,000 as opposed to £651,000. The building also has a category C energy efficiency rating (64) as a result of a very enthusiastic green team.

As the government are not prepared to provide a valuation of the court building, I believe this factor should not be considered or taken into account when making a final decision. Therefore it is clear that Yate is the more viable court to keep open.

The closure of the courts would also mean that my constituents who currently work at the site may lose their jobs. The majority of the staff live inside a five mile radius of the Courthouse. Some currently walk or cycle to work. Many have childcare or caring responsibilities which would prove extremely difficult to manage if the staff were required to commute on a daily basis further afield.

It is important to ensure that justice is accessible and visible, with the closure of Yate Magistrates Court, this will not be possible.

Bath Council have offered the Tribunals Service the use of the Guildhall as a space to hold future hearings if the Court is to be closed down. Yate does not have such a facility where hearings could be heard.



Many of the parties who appear in Yate Magistrates Court are, thankfully, well represented by local solicitors and barristers. The proposed closure will mean that all these people, many of whom are vulnerable, will have to travel to Bristol.

With regards to the precinct itself, the court was purpose built in 1982. The consultation outlines that there is need for significant investment for the heating systems. However there are no problems with the heating as the consultation suggests. The air conditioning unit has not been working, which often results in warm court rooms in the summer months. However, this is an issue common to many Court houses including much newer ones, such as the proposed replacement Civil Justice Centre in Bristol.

The five courtrooms and 12 custody cells are all operational. The youth and family court also has its own entrance and is on a separate floor from the adult criminal courts and has separate consultation rooms from those used by the adult court. There is even a family room for those court users attending with young children.

The court recently held a trial blitz as part of a national scheme initiated by the judiciary. All 5 courtrooms were in use (100% utilisation). The court dealt with approximately 105 trials. Over 60 were effective, with 30 cracked on the day with no further listing required, thus leaving only a small percentage as ineffective. This demonstrates the court can perform very favourably as a trial centre when compared to large, PFI city centre courts.

I hope this evidence helps towards the case for keeping North Avon Magistrates Court open and I hope all these considerations will be taken into account when discussing the outcome of the consultation.

Please do not hesitate to contact my office if I can be of further assistance in the matter.

Yours ever,

Luke Hall MP
Member of Parliament for Thornbury, Yate and the surrounding villages