

NORTHERN IRELAND COURT SERVICE

ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY - OUTCOME OF PUBLIC CONSULTATION EXERCISE AND DECISIONS TAKEN IN RELATION TO COURT ACCOMMODATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

On Thursday 7th November 2002, Rosie Winterton MP, Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department gave the following answer in response to a written Parliamentary Question.

The Minister stated: "After full consideration of all the information gathered during the public consultation exercise which followed the issue of the consultation document 'Court Accommodation in Northern Ireland 2001-2010', I have decided that the courthouses at Clogher and Cookstown will close at the end of this year and business will be transferred to the new courthouse in Dungannon. Business currently dealt with in rented accommodation in Kilkeel will transfer to Newry courthouse.

The courthouse at Banbridge and Larne will remain as court venues as will Limavady courthouse. Hearings at Limavady courthouse will be restricted to Magistrates' Courts Adult criminal business. The future of Limavady courthouse will be reviewed in light of business trends and with particular regard to the outcome of the Review of Public

Administration in Northern Ireland and any changes this necessitates in court divisional boundaries.

The Northern Ireland Court Service will conduct a feasibility study in the North Down area on the possibility of replacing the existing courthouses at Bangor and Newtownards. Consideration will also be given to upgrading or replacing the courthouse at Lisburn.

Background

In its Corporate Plan 1999-2002 the Northern Ireland Court Service outlined its intention to review court accommodation in Northern Ireland and to produce a strategy document setting out proposals to improve its Estate over the next 10 years. The Strategy document resulting from that review set out improvements made in recent years, work currently under way and future planned improvements. It also proposed the closure of 6 courthouses, Banbridge, Clogher, Cookstown, Kilkeel, Larne and Limavady.

The strategy was launched for public consultation on Friday 7th December 2001. The consultation period closed on Friday 29th March 2002.

At the close of the consultation period all information gathered during the exercise was collated and presented for consideration by the Minister.

Decisions

The Minister confirmed the proposals to close the courthouses at Clogher and Cookstown and transfer business to the new courthouse at Dungannon. She also decided that the business dealt with in the rented accommodation in Kilkeel would transfer to the courthouse at Newry. The facilities at these three venues were poor and the level of business carried out at Clogher and Kilkeel was low. The levels of business conducted at Cookstown was much greater than at Clogher and Kilkeel, however Cookstown business also included court business transferred from Dungannon following a bomb attack which destroyed Dungannon courthouse in January 1989. A new courthouse at Dungannon, some 14 miles away from the Cookstown venue opened in January 2003.

In relation to the venues at Banbridge, Larne and Limavady the facilities at all three venues were considered to be not up to modern standard. In respect of Banbridge and Limavady the adjoining courthouses at Newry and Londonderry respectively were relatively close and after substantial recent refurbishment have all the facilities not available in Banbridge and

Limavady. However, business levels at Banbridge were significantly greater than at both Limavady and Larne. On the basis of business levels alone it was considered appropriate to retain the courthouse at Banbridge.

In relation to Larne, the physical remoteness of some parts of this district from the proposed alternative venue at Antrim and this coupled with the poor transport links within the district pointed to retaining this particular venue.

At Limavady although the facilities were poor and business levels comparatively low, it was noted that there was strong support locally for the retention of the courthouse. The costs however of providing some additional facilities within the restricted Limavady site were considered prohibitive and did not represent value for money. To go some way towards meeting local concerns principally from the local Solicitors Association and Limavady Council it was decided to retain the courthouse for the hearing of only adult criminal business. Any court business including youth courts, domestic courts and any hearings requiring specialist facilities will be transferred to the courthouse at Londonderry. Furthermore, the future of Limavady will be reviewed in light of continued business trends and with particular regard to the outcome of the Public Review of Administration in Northern Ireland.