

BOROUGH OF KETTERING

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| Report Originator | Strategic Management Team | <i>Fwd Plan Ref No:</i> A15/015 | |
| Wards Affected | ALL | 9 th September 2015 | |
| Title | CONSULTATION ON POTENTIAL CLOSURE OF KETTERING MAGISTRATES' AND COUNTY COURT | | |

Portfolio Holder: Cllrs Lloyd Bunday and James Burton

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To agree a response to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) consultation on the closure of courts and tribunal services in the Midlands region which proposes the closure of both Kettering County Court and Kettering Magistrates' Court and to agree to make an offer to the Courts service on how the Council might work with the Court services in partnership to retain these services locally.

2. INFORMATION

On the 16th July the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) published a consultation paper on the provision of court and tribunal services in the Midlands Region. The consultation proposes to close 14 courts and tribunals in the region including Kettering County Court and Kettering Magistrates' Court. It also proposes closure of Corby Magistrates' Court. The relevant pages from the consultation document are reproduced at **Appendix 1**. The consultation closes on the 8th October 2015.

2.1 Kettering County Court

2.1.1 Kettering County Court is one of two courts in Northamptonshire, the other being the Northampton Combined Court. It is currently open and staffed two days per week. The paper proposes that the Court is closed and its workload is transferred to Northampton Crown Court, County Court and Family Court hearing centre.

2.1.2 The rationale for closure is that the existing Kettering County Court building is not fit for purpose and would require major investment for the delivery of modern justice. The current annual operating costs for the court are approximately £104,000

2.2 Kettering Magistrates' Court

2.2.1 Kettering Magistrates' Court is one of four magistrates' courts in Northamptonshire, the others located in Corby, Northampton and Wellingborough. The court deals with adult and youth criminal court business and Tribunal matters and currently sits 4 days per week.

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- 2.2.2 The MOJ consultation proposes that the Kettering Magistrates' Court closes and work is consolidated and transferred to Wellingborough Magistrates' Court. The same solution is proposed within the detail relating to the closure of Corby Magistrates' court.
- 2.2.3 The rationale for closure of Kettering Magistrates' court again surrounds the building not being fit for purpose and providing the appropriate facilities for victims and witnesses.
- 2.2.4 The annual operating costs for Kettering Magistrates' court are £82,000.
- 2.2.5 Members may be reminded of a similar proposal to close Kettering Magistrates' Court in 2010. At that time we responded to the consultation and the decision was made to retain the courts in Kettering as Wellingborough and Corby did not have the capacity to absorb the workload from Kettering. The consultation paper states that over the last five years the workload has continued to reduce and Wellingborough now has the capacity to pick up the work from both Kettering and Corby.

3. CONSULTATION RESPONSE - POTENTIAL FOR PARTNERSHIP WORKING

3.1 Our draft consultation response is attached at Appendix 2. The main thrust of this is to encourage HM Courts and Tribunal Service to work in partnership with Kettering Borough Council to retain a local court service. We have structured the response to address the three main aims of the MOJ outlined in the consultation paper which are:-

- Ensuring access to justice
- Delivering Value for Money
- Enabling efficiency in the longer term

3.2 The following key issues and opportunities are emphasised:

3.2.1 Kettering's Multi Agency Hub

Members are aware we have most public services operating out of our Bowling Green Road/London Road building, Health, CAB, etc. In this context, the two key partners are the Police and the Probation Service. The former are already based here, the latter will relocate their operations here very shortly.

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3.2.2 Kettering's Central Location and Growth

Kettering is the largest town in North Northamptonshire and additionally is in the geographic middle of all the towns the Magistrates' and County Court will serve. Thus, public transport and access issues are best met in Kettering. Our response details the importance of our location and the impact of future growth.

3.2.3 Impact on other public and voluntary sector services

The response outlines how other public and voluntary sector services within Kettering would be affected by any closure. Significantly, the police are locating their new criminal Justice Centre in Kettering and therefore, a Kettering court base would provide:-

- i. A more accessible and convenient location for attendees of the court.
- ii. A venue where the key supporting public services – Police and Probation – are already on site facilitating maximum efficiency and co-ordination.

3.3 The Offer to the Courts Service

3.3.1 The Council has rooms and a council chamber already suitable and easily adapted for formal hearings, tribunals and therefore perhaps some of the courts outlined in the proposal. Kettering Borough Council is therefore in a good position to respond to the consultation confirming,

- a. the key objective is to retain a County and Magistrates' court in Kettering,
- b. to make proposals regarding how Kettering Borough Council can work in partnership with the MOJ to utilise KBC estate to meet their key principles outlined in Appendix 1

3.3.2 The local MP has already presented a paper to the relevant minister making these points and one outcome has been to secure time with officials at a regional level to present our response and our offer for partnership working.

3.4 The attached draft consultation response, attached at Appendix 2, is submitted for member approval.

4. CONSULTATION AND CUSTOMER IMPACT

4.1 Kettering Borough Council is being consulted. In preparing this response discussions have or are due to be held with magistrates locally, as well as with regional representatives of HM Courts and Tribunal Service. Some of those discussions will take place between the publication of this report and the date of the meeting where a verbal update will be made.

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5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 One of the Council's priorities is to develop a joined up offer of public services in one location, to reap benefits for the customer by simplifying and joining up services, as well as locating them in one place, sharing facilities and reducing overall public sector costs.
- 5.2 A further priority is to support and enable the development of the town centre as a retail, leisure and public service hub. Loss of the magistrates' and County Court services in Kettering would damage the town centre by fragmenting that public service offer.

6. USE OF RESOURCES

- 6.1 Closure of the courts service in Kettering would increase costs for this Council in time and travel. The same strain would be placed on other public sector service, the police, Youth Offending Service etc., voluntary and community sector advice services, solicitors, witnesses and victims of crime.

7. RECOMMENDATION

The Executive is recommended to approve the attached consultation response and to make an offer to HM Courts and Tribunal Service to work in partnership to relocate all or some of the courts services to the Municipal Offices building.

Background Papers:

Title

Date

Contact Officer

Previous Minutes/Reports:

Ref:

Date: