

Press statement

We are extremely sorry that we have failed to save Sittingbourne Magistrates Court from closure. The decision of the Court, which we respect, was that the Ministry of Justice had the right to close Sittingbourne Court following the consultation procedure that was carried out last year. It does not mean that that decision was right.

In our opinion it clearly was not. The whole of the borough of Swale, a socially deprived area ranked as the 9th most deprived borough in the South East is now without a magistrates, youth or family court. This means that victims, witnesses and defendants will be forced to travel many miles to obtain justice, in some instances this involve journeys of 40 miles which by public transport could take up to 6 hours in total.

It is not that Sittingbourne was underutilised, the Ministry initially claimed that its closure plan was aimed at courts where the utilisation rate was less than 80%. They acknowledge that Sittingbourne's was 82%. The court has three court rooms and sits every day dispensing justice to a wide area of Kent.

Since we have launched our bid to keep the court open we have received enormous support from a wide range of people from parents of young defendants to magistrates, from victim's volunteers to disable lawyers who work in the court. Fellow solicitors firm Copland and Sons based on the Isle of Sheppey have contributed time and pledged money to the campaign. In addition we have been given financial backing and support of the Kent Law Society and the Law Society of England and Wales who have supported us in line with their own concerns about access to justice.

We share in this concern and this is why we took this action investing our own money and time in bringing this action. All of the work we have put in has been undertaken without remuneration and the services of our Queen's Counsel Mr William Clegg have been given freely such is the commitment to local justice.

The decision will affect justice in Swale, the distances people will now be expected to travel to court will we believe cause some to decline to attend, witness may think better in minor cases of having to travel longer distances and give up more of their time, defendants who in the past could access their local court may find that they are not able to travel the greater distances now required, thereby resulting in more warrants being issued and scarce police resources being used to arrest and bring them before the courts. This may also result in more people being kept in prison before their cases are dealt with in order to ensure their attendance at court.

As a result of this decision Justice will suffer and the cost to the criminal justice system overall is likely to rise. We therefore call upon the Ministry of Justice to reconsider even at this late stage their decision to close the court.