



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals
Service: Estate Strategy Update

22 November 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service: Estate Strategy Update

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Alban Maginness
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

Mr Glyn Capper	Department of Justice
Ms Jacqui Durkin	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
Ms Sharon Hetherington	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
Mr Peter Luney	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service

The Chairperson: The Courts and Tribunals Service and departmental officials are attending today's meeting to outline the proposed way forward with the proposed closure of five court hearing centres and the review of the courts estate. I welcome Jacqui Durkin, chief executive, Sharon Hetherington, head of finance and estates, and Peter Luney, head of court operations, from the Courts and Tribunals Service, and Glyn Capper, deputy director of finance, from the Department. This session will be recorded by Hansard, and a transcript will be published on the Committee web page. I invite Jacqui to take over.

Ms Jacqui Durkin (Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service): The consultation on proposals to close five hearing centres at Bangor, Larne, Limavady, Magherafelt and Strabane and to transfer court business to another courthouse closed in March 2012. We received 73 responses, 62 of which were against closure, and we also received two petitions. Public meetings were also held at each of the five courthouses. You may recall that the consultee report was presented to the Committee in July this year. The hearing centres are open on court hearing days only and are generally used for adult Magistrates' Court business. The facilities available are not in keeping with the standards that court users experience in most other court venues and that we strive to provide.

The drivers for the consultation were primarily efficiency savings in running costs. The Courts and Tribunals Service is required to live within its budget and to deliver against its savings plans. Our savings delivery target for 2013-14 is £6.3 million. Another driver was the increased utilisation of the court estate. There is capacity in our other courthouses for increased business. A further key driver is about better facilities for victims and witnesses. In the Criminal Justice Inspection report on the

adequacy of the courts estate in May 2012, the chief inspector supported the closure of the hearing centres. The Justice Committee report on victims and witnesses also commented on the adequacy of some court facilities, and the victim and witness strategy action plan that is being consulted on has actions to improve victim and witness facilities in our courts.

We appreciate the strength of feeling among some consultees about the retention of their local courthouse. We listened carefully to the consultee feedback and undertook some further work, including reviewing the running costs and capital costs, doing a review of the equality screening and re-performing the equality screening in keeping with best practice. We also reviewed the accommodation facilities at each hearing centre and the proposed alternative courthouses again.

Taking into account the consultee feedback, the Criminal Justice Inspection report recommendations, the Committee's report on victims and witnesses and the proposed strategy action plan, the Minister has decided to close Bangor and Larne by April 2013, to close Magherafelt and Limavady on implementation of a single jurisdiction for Northern Ireland, which is likely to be in around April 2014, and to retain Strabane for consideration in the development of a new Department of Justice (DOJ) estate strategy. Although the Criminal Justice Inspection report recommended a courts estate strategy, after discussions with colleagues and given the financial constraints and number of Department of Justice organisations with estate needs throughout Northern Ireland, the Minister has approved the development of a Department of Justice estate strategy, which encompasses the needs of wider Department of Justice-funded organisations, many of which provide services from regional offices.

That approach provides an opportunity to explore options for co-location and a justice centre concept. The development of the new strategy will be led by the Department, with appropriate input from agencies and other sponsored organisations.

I hope that my remarks have been helpful. We are happy to answer any questions.

The Chairperson: The vast majority of responses were opposed to closure. What was the main reason for that? Was it access to justice? By closing these hearing centres, how can you ensure that access to justice is not going to be denied?

Ms J Durkin: I will hand over to Peter for that question, but I can confirm that access to justice was one of the key issues that was raised in the context of travel time and costs for people who had to use public transport. I will let Peter give you the detail.

Mr Peter Luney (Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service): One of the key factors that came out of the consultees' responses was about travel and the need to travel further to the alternative court location. We had some data. I understand entirely that consultees sought to present the worst-case scenario and focused on public transport difficulties and, in particular, shortcomings in public transport in rural areas. We know from our recent customer exit survey that comparatively few court users actually relied on public transport. Less than 5% came to court using public transport at the five hearing centres. That is in no way intended to diminish the impact. We think that it goes some way to serve to lessen the issue, given that it appeared from the survey that the vast majority of court users had access to some sort of private vehicle.

We also noted that in all the hearing centre areas, only a limited range of business is conducted. People from those areas will already travel to the alternative court locations, or perhaps even further for certain types of court hearings. In general, family proceedings business, family care centre business and County Court business will not be dealt with at your hearing centre, so a lot of court users are already making that trip.

The Committee will already be aware that we have done some significant modernisation of court office services, and they can now be accessed in a variety of ways. We know that the footfall in court hearing centres dropped off quite significantly as a result of that modernisation.

On accessing courtroom facilities or services, if we are going to close the hearing centres and transfer the business away from them, there is no alternative. The alternative is to travel to the other location. We were recently approached by Larne Borough Council, which suggested that we engage with it following the refurbishment of its facilities to see whether there is the possibility of retaining some hearings in the town by using council premises. We will be more than happy to do that where that can

be deemed suitable. However, by and large, the court sittings will move to the alternative court location.

The Chairperson: Will that make the administration of justice more efficient?

Mr Luney: The services that we provide to the court users will be significantly enhanced by moving to the bigger court location.

The Chairperson: Define that for me.

Mr Luney: Court hearing centres are, by and large, the smallest and least well-equipped of the court buildings in the courts estate. If they are moved to the alternative court locations, which are generally bigger and better equipped, with better facilities, better waiting rooms, better consultation rooms and styles of court rooms that are more suited to particular types of business, we will be able to meet the needs of court users better.

The Chairperson: Does the capacity exist to absorb that workload?

Mr Luney: Yes. We considered capacity in some detail before we launched the consultation and looked at data on numbers of sittings, which included the normal level of additional sittings in any year, and we are satisfied that there is more than ample capacity to accommodate the business at the main court venues. Some consultees raised the issue of the adequacy of the support facilities. Although they agreed that there were adequate courtroom facilities, they queried whether there were adequate consultation facilities. We have done some work on that, and since the consultation closed, we have reviewed all the ancillary facilities and believe that there are adequate facilities to meet the need. The proposals will certainly not diminish the level of service.

The Chairperson: I note that the projected savings have reduced from the original proposals, in which you anticipated higher savings in both recurrent and capital. Given that the departmental budget is over £1 billion, it does not seem a lot, with Strabane not now being included, to save less than £250,000 in annual recurrent spending.

Ms J Durkin: We appreciate that the savings now seem modest in light of that departmental budget, but they are still significant to an agency budget. Since the costs that we provided in the original consultation, we have been able to achieve further efficiencies through contract negotiations in IT, telecommunication and security and have been able to attract a lower tariff for our utilities bills. We felt that it was important to review those figures.

The capital funding is unfunded at the minute. We have a total capital budget of £2 million for the agency, which encompasses the whole courts estate, and bearing in mind that we were asked, when reviewing the hearing centres, to look at the capital spend that was needed as a de minimis. The previous conditions survey was about what you need to spend to bring those up to the same standards as you expect in other court venues. Given the size and age of our estate, we have a relatively low capital budget, and that is to encompass all our buildings throughout Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson: Finally, Strabane has been retained. What is the thinking there? Folks in the other areas might feel a little bit aggrieved that they are going but Strabane has been saved. Why is that?

Ms J Durkin: I understand that. As I said, we appreciate the strength of feeling, and it was made very clear to us at each public meeting how passionately people felt about their local courthouse. When looking at Strabane, we reviewed the facilities in Omagh and what the Strabane business would transfer to. In doing that, we acknowledged that Strabane offered disability access that some of the other courthouses could not offer. We also looked at whether there was potential for expansion of business in Strabane. It also provides a contingency site for the north-west in the event of Omagh or Londonderry being unavailable.

The Chairperson: Why would they be unavailable?

Ms J Durkin: For any number of reasons, such as if there was some sort of electrical fault or a security incident at one of those courthouses. If that happened, we would need to transfer the business elsewhere, as we have done on occasion.

Mr Dickson: Thank you for the report. I have a constituency interest in the Larne hearing centre, and I appreciate that, to quote your figures, it will cost almost £250,000 to make it disability-compliant even though the centre is used for only a few hours a week. Nevertheless, it has and will cause disruption to the delivery of justice services in that part of east Antrim.

I know that Larne Borough Council was in consultation with you on those matters, and I understand that it has come up with some constructive suggestions to provide alternative accommodation. I know that that cannot meet all the needs of a hearing centre, because you need to have custodial facilities prior to a hearing or afterwards when awaiting transfer to remand. Nevertheless, there is business that could be done in not a court service building but in another public sector building. For example, Larne Borough Council has just completed a massive renovation of a town-centre building that is not very far away and meets all the current modern compliances. Can you continue those negotiations with Larne Borough Council? Could there be alternatives for at least some of the services? Might that show a model way forward for other collaborations that could be rolled out in other places in Northern Ireland? That has a number of benefits. It means that centres or buildings that you have can transfer some of their business to other places. They could get the benefit of a small amount of income from them. It also perhaps conveniences the public and representatives more than the current situation does. Although I am obviously concerned that the facility is closing, I understand, on the basis of its use and the costs required, why it is closing. Can we be assured that there will be serious opportunities for the local authority to work with you on alternatives?

What will you do with the two buildings at Bangor and Larne? Will they simply be put up for sale? In the current market, they cannot be particularly valuable. I do not know the Bangor one, but I presume that the Larne building is a listed building.

Mr Luney: No.

Mr Dickson: OK. At least that must make it easier to sell. Will it be offered to the remainder of the public sector?

Ms J Durkin: Thank you for acknowledging that Larne courthouse is severely limited, particularly because the vast majority of business that is dealt with there is adult criminal business, which requires all the constraints and facilities that that type of business requires. We are absolutely happy to engage with the council. Officials have met council officials and viewed some facilities. Another meeting is planned to look at the new facilities in the town hall to see what potential there is. Courthouses, as I am sure that you know, are used for not only criminal business but a whole range of civil and family business. We are keen to engage with anyone who wants to speak to us about the other options. Those options will be explored further through the strategy development as well.

Mr Dickson: You have noted that the very nature of family business means that it was very difficult to conduct in Larne courthouse. In fact, a common complaint was that consultations had to take place in the cell when it was empty. That is wholly inappropriate for families.

Ms J Durkin: Yes. There is consultation on waiting areas and facilities for parties who are not keen to be in the same area as each other. Victims and witnesses are key to what we are saying. In some of the other locations, we can provide far superior facilities than we can in some of our smaller locations. We acknowledge the difficulties that that brings for families and for parents who have communication problems.

You asked about the future of those courthouses. In the first instance, we are exploring with our departmental colleagues whether there is any potential for anyone else in the Department of Justice to need or want those buildings. If not, they will be managed as part of Land and Property Services, together with the Department of Finance and Personnel. They will be offered, as I understand it, to the wider public sector to see whether anyone else has a need for those buildings and could use them. Only after that review has taken place would consideration be given to putting them on the open market. We are not quite yet at that stage. A series of steps needs to be gone through before they would be considered for sale.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for presenting to us today. I was listening very carefully to your figures, and you said that 5% of people used public transport. I notice that when you are looking at public transport, you refer to buses and trains. I live about seven miles outside Magherafelt. The regularity of buses and getting one to a location is one thing. I presume that you are sending people to Antrim.

Is that the idea? We do not have trains. The fact that your figures are so low — 5% — is because people do not use public transport because of its infrequency. It is a catch-22 situation: public transport is not there because people do not use it, and people do not use it because it is not there. I, therefore, add a note of caution to your figure of 5%. People have to use taxis or rely on friends and family, and so on, to get about, particularly those who do not have vehicles or access to them.

When was the disabled access work done to Strabane courthouse?

Ms J Durkin: Strabane courthouse always had a courtroom on the lower tier. If you are familiar with it, you will know that you have to go up steps to get into the main courtroom, but there was always an entrance at ground floor level to the lower courtroom.

Mr McGlone: I am asking two things. Was it compliant with disabled access requirements as it was? If not, was more recent work carried out to the courthouse to make it more accessible?

Ms J Durkin: No. It was always compliant, in that you can access the ground floor courtroom from the precincts of the court building.

Mr A Maginness: I am not terribly impressed by this series of proposals, and I think that there is value in reviewing them once again. Strabane has, more or less, been given a reprieve, which is a good decision, but you really should look at the others. You are dealing with largely rural areas where the population is dispersed. The rural population live not in a town but in the countryside. Therefore, you are not simply going from, say, Limavady to Coleraine, rather, you are coming from the outlying neighbourhoods and townlands, and so forth. You have to take that into consideration as well. It is not simply a matter of transferring people from Limavady to Coleraine.

The other thing to consider is the time that people spend there, particularly professionals such as the police, various professional witnesses, professional support staff and, of course, the legal profession. There would be a serious loss of time, and I think that you have to take that into consideration as well. Those Magistrates' Courts largely deal with petty sessions, and I do not think that you require an awful lot of facilities for that type of work to be carried out. You could scale down the considerations that you need for another courthouse where you are dealing with, for example, the Crown Court, the County Court, and so forth. Therefore, you can, in fact, look at these afresh and say, "We really just need a room and perhaps a holding cell or whatever." You could review it in light of that.

Mr Stewart Dickson made a proposition about the new town hall in Larne. I would have thought that that could be usefully changed, rather than refurbished — it has been refurbished — and it could then be used as a courtroom.

I remember years ago when I was junior counsel, I used to partake in Newtownbreda petty sessions in Cooke Rugby Club in the barroom.

Mr Humphrey: Did that affect the result of the cases?

Mr Wells: And then the Boer War broke out.

Mr A Maginness: Saloon justice.

It was improvised, of course, but it served the purpose. I do not think that we would accept that today. Nonetheless, you can modify buildings so that they may be usefully used.

My other point is this: towns are precious about their status. When you remove a courthouse, you effectively relegate the town. I think that you have to take that into consideration. I agree with the Chair that the savings amount to nothing really. You are not saving very much at all. By the sound of it, and through reading the consultation responses, there is a lot of professional opposition throughout the different centres. You have to take into consideration the quality of service that professionals can give to clients.

Ms J Durkin: We have carefully reviewed all the consultee feedback. Today's court user — victim or witness — has a reasonable expectation of having a private consultation room and a waiting room where he or she feels secure about being in the court environment. Some people find it traumatic enough to have to come to give evidence. We are not able to provide those facilities in those

courthouses. Victims and witnesses coming for Magistrates' Courts' criminal business deserve the same facilities as victims and witnesses coming to the Crown Court.

The legal profession in most of those areas is already travelling to the proposed alternative courthouse for civil, family and other types of business. We also found that it is not necessarily people who live in that town coming to that courthouse. The court that they are going to will be where the offence arose. We fully acknowledge that people will be coming from that local town to their local courthouse, but we also need to consider that there will be others for whom it may be more convenient to go to the alternative location. We are not in any way trying to hide away from the fact that we realise that the proposals will cause inconvenience to some people, but we believe that we are offering, in the main, better facilities for the legal profession, and particularly for their clients, to come to court, consult and have proper facilities to wait in while they are waiting for their case to be heard.

Mr A Maginness: The South Derry Solicitors' Association, at paragraph 5.13 in the summary of consultation responses, suggested:

"Magherafelt Courthouse is geographically well placed to offer contingency for other court venues and it would be strategically well positioned within the proposed single jurisdiction for magistrates' and county courts."

It is making quite a strong case there, and the argument that you are putting forward is, to some extent, in the context of the proposed single jurisdiction and that there should be a change there, but the association is arguing in the opposite direction.

Ms J Durkin: Magherafelt, unfortunately like a lot of the older buildings, cannot be modified at any sort of reasonable cost, whether or not the funding were available, to bring it up to that standard. As I said, one of the key drivers is about increasing the utilisation. We do have other courthouses in the vicinity or in that region that provide those sorts of facilities. We are proposing, on single jurisdiction, for the business to go to Antrim. Single jurisdiction also gives us the option to look at other courthouses, depending on the parties to the case, and say, "For that particular case, where the witnesses are travelling from wherever or for whatever reason, would it be better for that case to be heard in, say, Dungannon?"

These are the sorts of options that a single jurisdiction would be able to afford us: to look at the particular circumstances of a case, and ask where the most appropriate site or most appropriate facilities for that case to be heard are?" That then becomes a factor in where the case is listed for hearing.

Mr Luney: I see this as the first step to a more consolidated but much better-equipped courts estate that needs to be focused on courthouses that have the flexibility to deal with different types of business and different kinds of courtrooms. Those will, generally, be your larger centres. Magherafelt, like Strabane, is a two-courtroom venue. All the other ones are single courtroom venues. Unlike Strabane, however, the utility, particularly of courtroom two, is comparatively limited. Although I understand the point that that solicitors' association is making about geographical position, the courthouse is still quite constrained in overall utility.

Mr A Maginness: You are dealing with, fundamentally, Magistrates' Courts' sessions, and they would not be as stressful when it comes to resources as other courts. In particular, they are used less frequently, with perhaps only one or two sessions a week.

Ms J Durkin: Yes, there is usually only one regular hearing a week in those centres. You are very familiar with the types of cases being heard in the Magistrates' Court, but there are certainly occasions, particularly in contested cases such as common assault and domestic violence, on which witnesses need the use of appropriate waiting facilities until their case is heard. The same, or similar, demand for the availability of those types of facilities applies equally to the Magistrates' Court and the Crown Court, even though one has a higher volume of cases.

The Chairperson: My only comment on consolidating, Peter, is that we frequently hear that a service being consolidated means that it will improve. However, it is not always the case that a better outcome follows the consolidation of services. I am usually sceptical when I hear that type of comment. The proof is always in the eating.

Mr McCartney: Thank you for your presentation. I have a number of points. Will the buildings that will no longer be used be sold off?

Ms J Durkin: We are not sure yet. As I mentioned earlier, they will be offered to other Departments. As I understand it, they will be offered to the wider public sector. Only after that process has been gone through will consideration be given to putting them on the open market.

Mr McCartney: Is there a cost for the maintenance of those buildings in the absence of their being used?

Ms J Durkin: The efficiency savings that we have declared are net of whatever minimum maintenance costs we anticipate will be required to keep the buildings adequately secure and maintained.

Mr McCartney: The business from Bangor will go Newtownards, from Larne to Ballymena and from Limavady to Coleraine. Are there increased costs for those three centres?

Ms J Durkin: No, the staff are already based in the main court venue, so we do not anticipate any relocation costs or anything of any materiality.

Mr McCartney: Will there be no extra running costs or extra people going through the doors?

Mr Luney: We will need to provide courtroom security for the sittings when the business moves. Any such costs for the transfer of business have been netted off.

Mr McCartney: You mentioned a particular response in the exit survey. Was that the single question asked to people leaving the court?

Mr Luney: No.

Mr McCartney: Were they asked whether they had walked to court?

Mr Luney: People were asked how they got to court. We conduct an exit survey every other year, and it covers a full remit. The results are published locally and on the website. The mode of transport, distance travelled, and so on, were part of the survey.

Mr McCartney: It states that 5% used a bus or train. Why was that information extracted? If you extracted the information that 75% of people used a private car because there was a poor bus service, or because they did not want to be late for the court and the bus service did not tie into the court times, that would be good information.

Mr Luney: That is a fair point. We extracted that information because we had heard from a lot of the consultees about the difficulties with public transport and the impact that those would have on people trying to get to the alternative court locations. So we tried to draw out the fact that the vast majority of people have access to private transport. I take the point that the extrapolation of those figures needs to be treated with a bit of caution because how people got to the hearing centre might not necessarily be how they would get to the alternative court location. It is used as an indicator.

Mr McCartney: Are the new centres, for want of a better word, satisfied that they can soak up all the business that is coming to them? Have they been part of the process?

Ms J Durkin: Yes.

Mr McCartney: This is an unrelated question, but I just want to take the opportunity to ask it. Recently, in Derry, tribunals were placed in court settings for the first time. There has been some public commentary on that. What role does the Courts and Tribunals Service have in that? Can it disallow that, or did that happen as the result of a simple request approved by the Courts and Tribunals Service? If you cannot answer that question, that is understandable

Ms J Durkin: I hope that I can answer the question. The Courts and Tribunals Service has administrative responsibility for the appeals service. I think that what you are referring to are appeal service hearings.

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Ms J Durkin: Part of that is about finding appropriate facilities for tribunal hearings. As I said earlier, courthouses tend to be identified with criminal hearings. However, a significant amount of our business is civil and family business. The type of room used for that business is very similar to the type of room that would be used for a tribunal hearing. The reason is twofold: we are trying to increase the utilisation of the courts estate; and we are trying to provide as much efficiency as we can. We are not saying in any way, shape or form that rented premises will not be used any more for tribunals, but we are trying to identify, if there is a suitable room in a courthouse, why it should not be used when it would otherwise be lying empty.

I appreciate that some concerns have been raised about the appropriateness of holding tribunal hearings in courthouses. However, they have been used for other types of tribunal, they are used for other types of business, and we have avoided listing any tribunal hearings when there was a significant or very busy criminal court that day.

There is a great deal of liaison on what other business is listed in the courthouse on that day. However, we are very conscious of some concerns that have been raised. It is about making best use of the accommodation and facilities that we have available. It is important that courthouses are identified as places where all sorts of justice hearings are heard, not necessarily just criminal hearings.

Mr McCartney: Is the final decision yours or is the Department involved?

Ms J Durkin: The Department and the chairs of the tribunals are involved. Some of the rented premises do not have the waiting and consultation facilities that some tribunal appellants would like to use before they attend their hearing. Those are the sorts of facilities that can be provided in a court location. If anyone has any concerns about the accommodation that we propose to use, or if they want to view it, we have made that offer to other MLAs and are more than happy to facilitate that to allay concerns.

The Chairperson: Strabane has been reprieved, but is there no potential for it to be considered as a part of the wider estate strategy when the work that you have done on the other four feeds into that wider review? I note that this is no longer a courts estate review; it is a justice estate review. You want to look at the potential of joining voluntary sector organisations and other service providers in a justice-centred concept. So is there not the potential for some of those hearing centres to have an enhanced role as part of those justice-type centres and, therefore, is this not premature? Could it not be fed into the wider justice estate review that is now taking place?

Ms J Durkin: We believe that the limitations of those courthouses will apply further down the line, as they do now. We have already had some discussions with departmental colleagues about whether there is anyone else in the Department of Justice that can make the best use of those courthouses. However, they cannot be adapted without significant capital investment. As I say, it is about making sure that, where there is underutilisation in other parts of the courts estate, it can be maximised. We certainly do not believe that there can be any immediate utilisation of those courthouses for any other function.

Is there anything that you would like to say about the estate strategy, Glyn?

Mr Glyn Capper (Department of Justice): You are right, Chair, that we are now preparing a DOJ-wide estate strategy given the range of bodies and their geographical dispersion.

Jacqui's point is a fair one, and we considered that. The reasons for closing particular centres are based upon Criminal Justice Inspection reports and the condition of those buildings. Although we are looking at how all the Department's estate can be used, those particular centres are not appropriate, given their condition, for the wider review in the future.

The Chairperson: How long will this broader, justice-wide estate review take?

Mr Capper: It is important to say that a lot of work has already been done. Any estate strategy will be in two phases, the first of which is to take stock of what we have. Over the past couple of months, an awful lot of work has been done. As I said, there are at least 100 separate holdings across the

Department, excluding police and prison buildings. We have gathered information on running costs, occupation densities, lease renewals, and so on, so we have a foundation on which to build the strategy.

The next stage involves working with the Strategic Investment Board to recruit an estate specialist. I envisage that we will develop the DOJ-wide estate strategy in 2013-14. We will, of course, come back to the Committee at the appropriate points to seek your views.

The Chairperson: When will the Committee have sight of all 100 holdings that are part of the estate strategy? When will you be able to come to the Committee with a detailed outline of the estate strategy showing all the areas that you are looking at, the time frame and the criteria that will be used?

Mr Capper: We should be able to come to the Committee to seek your views on the agreed terms of reference for the estate review early in the new year. We will build on that, and I imagine that we will have the opportunity before the summer to take stock of the existing estate and look at various options for using it better. There will be three or four key events in 2013-14. First, early in 2013, we will agree the terms of reference and a timetable.

The Chairperson: We are talking about five hearing centres, and you are talking about reviewing over 100. Given the considerable interest in the five hearing centres, I suspect that there will be significant interest in the entire justice estate now being reviewed. It is important that we have a role in all that.

Mr McGlone: I wanted to pick up on something that Mr McCartney said about the use of courthouse facilities for the likes of social security and disability tribunals. My constituency office is involved in quite a few of those. It must be emphasised that, for many people, particularly those whose disabilities are related to mental health conditions and who are in receipt of benefit for that reason, appearing at an ordinary tribunal is quite nerve-racking and off-putting in the first place, never mind in a formal court setting. Despite the best intentions of the tribunal panel members, that formality can be quite nerve-racking. Coming to a courthouse, which, whether we like it or not, sends out a message and gives the psychological impression that it is an interface with the law and that you are appearing in a court, can further add to the fear and build-up of stress that people face. I am sure that there are plenty of other places in Derry where people can sit down and have access to their representation without the formality of a courthouse setting. It is not the right place for those types of hearings.

Ms J Durkin: I can understand why there are concerns. However, colleagues are working with user forums and tribunal chairs to look at the barriers to, or the chill factor of, using certain venues or particular courthouses for certain types of tribunals. Obviously, if someone comes forward and raises the particular concern that they do not want their hearing to take place in a courthouse, the tribunal will consider that. We also have to consider that renting other premises comes at a cost. If there is the potential to use a suitable empty courtroom with an appropriate layout and the right facilities, it would be only reasonable to explore that option. I take on board that some people may not want to go to their local courthouse for that type of hearing.

Mr A Maginness: You could try the rugby club.

Mr McGlone: So what will you do about those who do not wish to attend their local courthouse?

Ms J Durkin: As I said, colleagues are consulting user groups on how they feel about using a courtroom. Concerns have been raised in Newry and by the Deputy Chairperson, Mr McCartney, and we are taking those on board. We will engage with groups and seek their views, but we have to balance that against making best use of the estate and the resources that we have available.

Mr McGlone: An update on where that evaluation process goes would be helpful to the Committee.

The Chairperson: Do other members have any comments? Is there a particular view that members want the Committee to express to the Department on the back of this briefing?

Mr A Maginness: I suggest that the Department shelves this and reviews it as part of the overall estate strategy. It seems to me that there are no real savings to be made here. There are some savings, of course, but they are not that great; they are minimal. The changes would entail a lot of disruption for ordinary people and professionals involved in the courts. At least in the interim, those courts could continue. I make the point again about the status of towns, which I do not think is a trivial

matter. I do not think that the Department has considered it, but a town takes a pride in having its own courthouse. That is part and parcel of the local character of a community. There is not much to be gained by the closure of Bangor and Larne courthouses next year and the other two in the following year.

Mr Dickson: I have a great deal of sympathy with Mr Maginness's view. I would, of course, love Larne courthouse to stay open, and that would help me because people have come to me and asked me to support that proposition. The reality is, though, that £250,000 needs to be spent on providing disability access to that building. At present, the Courts and Tribunals Service could face complaints from members of the public attempting to use the courthouse. I would like negotiations with, in that case, Larne Borough Council — there could be similar negotiations with other organisations — to be advanced to a point at which you could seamlessly transfer proceedings from Larne Courthouse to facilities available elsewhere in the town. I accept your concern that simply closing one building might somewhat diminish the prospect of opening an alternative. I encourage the Courts and Tribunals Service to consider coming back with alternative strategies for the delivery of some services because there is the serious problem of some buildings being simply not fit for purpose.

The Chairperson: Now that members have heard Alban's view, are there any other comments? When this issue was first raised, my initial reaction was that it would mean a considerable saving and that the capital costs involved would also be significant. A more detailed survey reduces those savings significantly. I have sympathy with the argument that this should be considered as part of the overall estate review and so this decision may be premature. I think that people will question why these five hearing centres — rather, it is four because Strabane has been reprieved — have been singled out in advance of an overall justice estate review. Why are they being picked on when more than 100 facilities will be part of an overall departmental review? I certainly find it difficult to justify singling out these four centres in advance of that review. Therefore, I would have sympathy with the Committee deciding to express a view that the decision is premature. I also note the arguments that officials made. Strong arguments have been advanced for why some of the facilities, as they stand, are not suitable. However, whether they should be singled out in advance of the overall review is questionable. That is my opinion.

Mr Wells: As much as it grieves me, I have considerable sympathy with what Alban said. We experienced the loss of Kilkeel courthouse several years ago, and that has caused huge inconvenience to the community in the Mourne, who, together with their legal advisers and witnesses, now have to go to Newry. I think that the whole thing is a bit premature given the new statistical information that we have. I think that we would be minded to row in behind Alban's view.

The Chairperson: Unless other members have contrary views, is the Committee agreed that we collectively express a view that the decision to close the four hearing centres is premature and that they should be considered as part of the overall justice estate strategy review?

Mr Dickson: That review should also consider alternative accommodation opportunities.

The Chairperson: OK. Obviously, it is for the Minister to decide whether he takes cognisance of the Committee's view, but I am happy that that is the expressed view of the Committee. Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I thank the officials for coming along today.