

Epsom County Court Closure: Evidence from Epsom and Ewell Citizens Advice Bureau :August 2010

Epsom and Ewell Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) is concerned about the potential impact of the proposed closure of Epsom County Court. The closure will limit access to justice for residents of Epsom and Ewell and surrounding boroughs and could have an adverse impact on the level of homelessness in the borough. Furthermore, the net efficiency savings used as justification for the closure appear to be uncertain.

Background

A recent consultation document released by the Minister for Justice Kenneth Clarke proposed that Epsom County Court be closed, as part of a programme to reduce the number of County Courts by 20% in Kent, Sussex and Surrey. Hearings previously held at Epsom will be redirected to either Guildford (27 miles away), where there are two spare hearing rooms, or Reigate (9 miles away). Relevant parties have been given until the 15th September 2010 to make representations.

What is a county court?

County Courts such as Epsom deal with civil matters such as claims for debt repayment including the enforcement of court orders and return of goods bought on credit, personal injury, breach of contract concerning goods or property, family issues such as divorce and housing disputes, including mortgage and council rent arrears and re-possession, making them an important part of administering local justice and dispute resolution. Epsom County Court itself serves over 100,000 citizens in four constituencies (Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead and Sutton), and hears around 100 cases per month.

Why should Epsom County Court be kept open?

The Minister of Justice argues that £551,000 in operating costs will be saved by closing Epsom County Court, claiming that 'increasing use of internet and email to communicate and access services' negates the need for local, tangible public services.

However, the £551,000 projected savings may overestimate the potential savings from closure. Epsom County Court was in fact recently located to newly refurbished premises, with three courtrooms and excellent disabled access: public money spent on this relocation and refurbishment will be wasted if the court were to be closed.

Furthermore, if the County Court is relocated to Guildford or Reigate many clients, facing repossession proceedings, may be unable to attend hearings, severely damaging their chances of remaining in their homes: it is generally agreed that non-attendance at court by the defendant significantly increases the chances of possession being granted.

The potential effect of these people becoming homeless could prove costly. The cost to the public purse of providing temporary accommodation and the re-housing afterwards amounts to £5,300 per case per year (Demonstrating the Cost effectiveness of Preventing Homelessness, CLG, July 2010). Epsom & Ewell Citizens Advice Bureau, through its Court Desk, last year successfully assisted 156 clients facing potential homelessness, thereby saving the public substantial amounts in housing costs. Therefore, if just 1 in 5 of the clients whose homelessness the CAB Court Desk helped to prevent were to lose their homes, a third of the projected savings from the court closure would be lost in temporary housing costs.

In fact, this estimate of the cost of homelessness is likely to be an underestimate as it does not account for the costs to the exchequer of higher benefit payments and lower taxes arising from unemployment associated with homelessness nor that the cost of temporary accommodation in Epsom is likely to be higher than the national average. Indeed, Surrey Law Centre recently estimated that every eviction avoided saved the taxpayer £34000.

Court closure will deny access to local justice. Many clients served by Epsom & Ewell Citizens Advice Bureau do not have reliable internet access and are among the most vulnerable in society, often confused by the fast moving repossession process and legal jargon.

The situation for these clients will be further compounded by both the cost and length of potential travel to Guildford. Government figures given for a car journey from Epsom to Guildford at peak time are an unrealistic 27 minutes. We provide below the cost of public transport from three areas of the borough to illustrate how access to justice is compromised.

- Travel from the Watersedge Estate in Ruxley ward to Guildford County Court takes 1 hour and 18 minutes (for a 9:30 start) at an extra cost of £12.40, compared to a 24 minute bus ride into Epsom
- Travel from Worcester Park to Guildford is increased to 1 hour and 4 minutes for £13.80 from a 27 minute journey for £4.10
- Travel from the Tattenham Corner area to Guildford replaces an 8 minute bus journey with a 1 hour and 41 minute journey for £20.

Travel to Reigate is no more convenient: the journey from Tattenham Corner described above is replaced by a 40 minute, £5.40 bus journey, increasing costs by £3.70. Often these clients are on minimal benefits following some adverse event in their lives such as job loss or illness.

Aside from the defendants discussed above, the closure of the County Court will adversely affect all those residents involved in civil, family and divorce cases and there may also be ramifications for creditors, who may face delays and difficulty in collecting what they are owed.

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