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Mr. D. W. Parr

23 October 2006

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Dear Julia,

PROPOSED CHANGES TO MAGISTRATES' COURT ARRANGEMENTS IN HALTON

As you know I have been approached by a number of local Magistrates, including the Chair of the Halton Bench, local councillors and members of the local legal profession who have raised with me concerns in respect of proposals to re-organise the Magistrates Courts arrangements across Cheshire

I am writing to you on behalf of these concerned parties and in particular Halton Borough Council to express their concerns in relation to these proposed changes.

In the first instance, it is disappointing that the Council has only become aware of the discussions and debates that are ongoing within Cheshire around changes to this important service through various sources, and has not, as yet, been informed or consulted formally by The Courts Service on what is proposed.

Local Elected Members and members of the Halton Bench continue to express serious concerns about what is proposed, which would appear on the face of it to be a reduction in the status of Halton's Courts.

The Council is concerned that these changes will take place without full consultation with all stakeholders, of which the Council is one. We would also like to understand the rationale behind the proposed changes and work with other partners to look at alternative models of increasing the availability of trial space and the most effective use of the courts in Halton.

We understand the key proposals are to:

- move all custody cases to the courts at Warrington, Chester and Crewe; and

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- to hold all motoring offence cases at Northwich.

The Council is aware of the need to improve the throughput of cases, but is concerned of the impact it will have in Halton and on the Halton community if these proposals go ahead.

There are four issues that are of particular concern to the Council as to the impact these proposals will have in Halton, they are as follows:

- Car Ownership – 32% of households within Halton have no access to a car. Nearly half the residents in Windmill Hill do not have access to a vehicle.
- Income Levels – Halton ranks, by some way, highest on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (21st, with the next nearest Cheshire District being Ellesmere Port at 141). Income deprivation is one of the most important domains in the IMD. Of the 10 areas in Cheshire which rank highest for income deprivation seven are in Halton. Adding additional transport costs to those who wish, or need, to attend court is likely to add further barriers to attendance.
- Attracting Local Magistrates – one of the very drivers for those joining the bench is that they will be administering local justice in the area where they live. There are great advantages in the courts being in close proximity to local magistrates as it reduces the amount of their valuable time in travelling to fulfil their functions. We need to do all we can to attract people to the Bench, and the Council feels that these new arrangements will deter Halton people from coming forward.
- The Future of Court Provision – the Council is clearly concerned that these reductions in activity will lead eventually to the withdrawal of all Court activity in Halton. The Council would want reassurance that this is not the case.

These issues are further developed upon in the attached paper. We would particularly wish to draw your attention to the issue of travel by public transport from Halton to Northwich. The journey by bus from Halton to Northwich is a tortuous one, with a return journey from Runcorn costing £9.10, and more if travelling from Widnes. This will deny many people the opportunity to attend court hearings.

The Council understands that one of the reasons for Northwich's selection as the place to hear traffic offences is its central location within Cheshire. However, looking forward Northwich is not a central location within the new Merseyside/Cheshire arrangements. In fact, the Halton Courts, either Runcorn or Widnes, would provide a more central location. Both have the capacity, are on occasions under-utilised, and have good access and free parking facilities. The highway network is excellent in the area, which is not the case in relation to Northwich. We would ask that this proposal be re-examined.

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We would welcome the opportunity for further dialogue before any decision is taken and for the opportunity to consider the proposals in detail, together with any alternatives which are equally aimed at improving the performance of the justice system in Halton.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

David Parr
Chief Executive

Encl.