

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 9th September 2010

REPORTING OFFICER: Chief Executive

SUBJECT: Consultation Paper – Provision Of Courts Services In Cheshire And Merseyside

WARDS: Borough-Wide

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1** To advise Members of responses received from Councillors in order to formulate a response to the consultation.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1** **That the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Resources, be authorised to finalise and dispatch the Council's response to the consultation.**

3. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1** Members will recall that at its meeting on 15 July 2010, the Executive Board received a report relating to a consultation document received from the Ministry of Justice on their proposals for the provision of Court Services in Cheshire and Merseyside. The formal consultation period would end on 15 September 2010.
- 3.2** Executive Board resolved that all Members be provided with a copy of the document and be invited to submit their comments to the Operational Director Legal and Democratic Services. It was further resolved that a report be brought to this meeting containing a draft response to the consultation.
- 3.3** Following that decision, the Operational Director Legal and Democratic Services wrote to all Councillors to seek their views. At the time of writing, responses have been received from two elected Members.

The first Councillor expresses the opinion that it is a shame that the building is used so little, and is in shabby condition. She would prefer the Court to remain in use to provide local access to justice for residents. She expresses concern as to the future use of the part of the building to be vacated, and goes on to question the effect on an area which is already deprived.

The second Councillor refers to access problems for persons with disabilities at the present building.

- 3.4** Members will recall that the Consultation Document suggested that the main issue for Runcorn County Court was the under-utilisation of its Hearing Room due to its small workload. The proposal was that work would transfer to Warrington Combined Court. The document indicated that that court is 8.7 miles from Runcorn County Court and suggests that the two are linked by a regular bus services which takes 33 minutes and costs approximately £5 for a day ticket. The Ministry of Justice considered that the stops at either end to be within easy walking distance of the courts and town centres. They further make the point that in 2009/10 the operating costs of Runcorn County Court were £32,779.
- 3.5** The Strategic Director Environment and Economy is carrying out an assessment of the transportation issues, which will be available at the meeting.
- 3.6** What is clear though, is that persons seeking to have access to the County Court will be put to greater inconvenience in travelling to Warrington, in terms of increased travel costs and the geography of getting to the combined court centre, particularly for those persons having to rely on public transport. It is also the case that there are car parking charges at Warrington, whereas it is free at Runcorn.
- 3.7** Set against this background, Members will recall that the proposal is to close Runcorn County Court but keep the building open for use as a Magistrates Court. Therefore, the cost benefit of the proposal could be questionable when set against the possible effects on vulnerable court users, who may well find it intimidating, difficult and expensive to travel further afield to access the justice system.
- 3.8** A draft consultation response is attached as Appendix 1 for Members' consideration and any further points will be welcomed prior to the document being finalised and dispatched.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1** The report does not have any implications in terms of Council policy.

5. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1** There are no other implications arising out of this report.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

- 6.1** Children and Young People in Halton
- 6.2** Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

- 6.3 A Healthy Halton
- 6.4 A Safer Halton
- 6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal – none.

There are no specific implications for any of these priorities arising from the report with the proviso, though, that the implications for certain sectors of the community of having to travel elsewhere to have access to the justice system will form part of the Council's response to the consultation.

7. RISK ANALYSIS

No applicable

8. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

The proposal to close Runcorn County Court will have implications for members of the community who will have to travel further to access the court system.

9. LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

- 9.1 Consultation documents and responses which are held by Mark Reaney, Operational Director, Legal and Democratic Services, 4th Floor, Municipal Building, Kingsway, Widnes.