Surrey and Sussex Judicial Business Group – Consultation on the future of listing youth cases for Sussex

Katy Bourne, Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner, welcomes the opportunity to comment on the future of listing youth cases for Sussex and would like to make the following response in relation to the three questions.

Are you in favour of maintaining the current arrangements for youth court locations across Sussex with some amendments to the listing patterns to improve efficiency by reducing frequency of sessions?

The Commissioner is supportive of maintaining the current arrangements for youth court locations across Sussex as a short-term measure.

Mrs Bourne recognises that, with the exception of the forthcoming courthouse closures at Chichester and Eastbourne, this option preserves local justice by retaining access to youth courts with reasonable travelling distances for the majority of youth casework.

This may also be the most appropriate interim option available until video enabled justice can be considered for all cases. However, this approach will require the development of more video locations to enable cases to be heard virtually.

In addition, the Commissioner acknowledges that this approach is more compatible for those victims wishing to attend first hearings and sentencing hearings to read out victim personal statements. This remains a better option for defendants, witnesses, representatives and support services too.

Are you in favour of Option 2, which proposes youth remand courts to be centralised at Worthing for work from West Sussex and at Hastings Youth Court for work from East Sussex?

Mrs Bourne recognises that this option demonstrates clear benefits for court efficiencies in terms of listing and utilisation and would improve specialism through regular practice. This option may provide additional opportunities for specialist support services to form, develop and 'cluster' around the two proposed operating centres (Worthing and Hastings). This option also ensures that a youth court is provided in two of the three local authority areas.

It is worth emphasising that whilst this approach is more accessible for residents in coastal locations, it takes little account of the extended travel time for court-users in the north of East Sussex and West Sussex. The Commissioner acknowledges that, in order to make this a viable option, this proposal would need to ensure that the numbers of localised sites where evidence can be provided virtually, are expanded.

Mrs Bourne also accepts that whilst part of this model will happen in any event with the forthcoming closure of Eastbourne Magistrates' Court, this option falls short of the favoured longer-term strategy set out in Option 3.

Do you agree with the proposal in option 3, for a single centrally listed youth court for Sussex?

The Commissioner agrees with the proposal for a single centrally listed youth court for Sussex. This option has clear benefits in respect of greater flexibility, courtroom utilisation, listing of cases, retaining specialism and, for those attending court in person, access to specialist support services clustered at Brighton Magistrates' Court. The opportunities for more regular court sittings and consolidation of trials to cover weekend and bank holiday operations are also reassuring.

It is important to note that this option would require agreed and complementary partner operating principles and technical fixes to enable all court users to have the ability to provide evidence virtually from local sites.

Mrs Bourne recognises that, until an expansion in video enabled justice takes place to provide more local sites, this option would lead to short-term increases in traveling for defendants, victims, witnesses, representatives and support services. Without this localised investment this model would present serious difficulties for all parties in respect of the complex geography of Sussex.

However, the Commissioner is encouraged to note that a similar proposal was successfully implemented in Surrey in 2014, where reduced workloads prompted three youth panels to merge into a single youth panel in one location. Mrs Bourne is confident that similar achievements can be realised in Sussex through video enabled justice.

The Commissioner would be happy to discuss any of the above points raised and would welcome being updated following the conclusion of the consultation.

Katy Bourne
Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner