


## Rationalisation of court venues has 'gone beyond the rational'

 The systematic closure of court venues all over the country has gone beyond what is rational and justified, and is damaging to the very fabric of the justice system, the Law Society has warned.

Speaking at the annual Justice Media Awards on 12 June, President John P Shaw said that the Law Society had serious concerns about the impact of cuts in the justice system that had resulted in the closure of dozens of courts across the country.

The Courts Service is now proposing to close the District Courts in Dún Laoghaire, Tallaght, Swords and Balbriggan – in effect, all but one of the suburban court-sitting venues in Dublin.

"While the cutbacks in State funding of the health system have been the subject of enormous media analysis and public debate," Mr Shaw added, "there has been very little debate about the cutbacks in State funding to the justice system – whether in relation to cuts in criminal legal aid or in the funding of the Courts Service. This has had consequent knock-on effects on access to justice for the citizens of Ireland."

### Almost 80 courts closed

Asked to comment on the matter on RTÉ's *Morning Ireland* on 23 June, director general Ken Murphy said that, since 2008, a total of 77 local courts had been closed down – a rate of over 12 per year – and still more courts were facing closure in the near future.

"The rationalisation of the Courts Service has gone beyond what is sensible and justified and poses a threat to the very fabric of our justice system," the director general commented.

Asked by interviewer Cathal MacCoille why the idea of closing the courts was



Cathal MacCoille: 'The Courts Service says this is about saving money and delivering efficiencies'

"short-sighted and flawed", Murphy replied: "We think the rationalisation has gone beyond the rational. For example, there were 14 court venues in Co Mayo – there are now four."

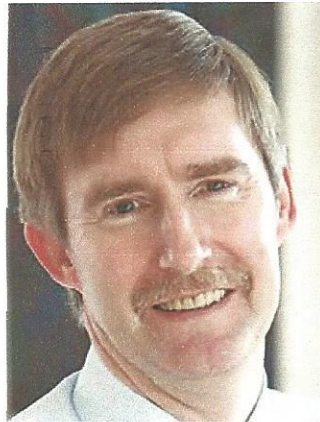
Murphy questioned how much money was actually being saved by closing courthouses. "In Cork, the West Cork Bar Association has been fighting in relation to Skibbereen Courthouse, following the closure of seven court venues there."

The association has brought judicial review proceedings against the Courts Service to prevent the closure of Skibbereen Courthouse. The cost of keeping the court open is estimated at €8,000 annually.

"If this court is closed, what additional costs will the State incur when a member of An Garda Síochána or the HSE has to travel a considerable distance and spend an entire day away from their regular duties?" Murphy asked.

### Capital punishment

Addressing the issue of the proposed Dublin closures, the director general pointed out that the capital had already suffered closures. "The courts in Dundrum, Rathfarnham and Kilmainham have all closed. Now, it's being proposed to



Ken Murphy: 'It is a matter for central government. There's been no debate about the cutbacks in the justice system'

close Swords and Balbriggan courthouses – the two fastest-growing population areas in the country – as well as Tallaght, which has a population in excess of the population of the city of Limerick, and Dun Laoghaire. The effect is that there would be no court venue between Bray and the north bank of the Liffey.

"In addition, it is proposed that all of the *Road Traffic Act* cases for the whole of Dublin – the greater metropolitan area with a population of well over a million people – will all take place in Blanchardstown, with all of the parking and other issues that that will give rise to. We think this is being driven solely by economics. We have sympathy with the Courts Service, of course. They are doing the best they can."

Queried by MacCoille as to the Courts Service's rationale behind the closures, which it had stated were about saving money and delivering efficiencies while not unduly impacting on access to justice, the director general replied: "This is driven by a massive cut in the Courts Service's budget. We say it is certainly not about improving the service to the public, which is what they should be about. It is about saving money. The president of the Law Society and I met with Minister Frances Fitzgerald this day last week. We raised this issue with her, among others. And it was pointed out to her by her officials, of course, that this isn't a matter for you, minister, this is a matter for the Courts Service. The Courts Service Board will decide it. But I took them up on that and said, 'Minister, it is a matter for you. It is a matter for central government. There's been no debate, no debate at all, about the cutbacks in the justice system.'

"This is going to have all sorts of impacts, not least on the million or so people in the greater Dublin area who, instead of courts of local and limited jurisdiction, are now getting more and more remote courts. And yes, this has happened all over the country, but it has happened in much smaller population areas. This is now happening in the greatest concentration of population in the country."

## With a 'c', not a 'q'

The Law Society is holding a reunion barbecue on Friday 5 September 2014 for all solicitors who have qualified within the past five years. It will take place on the grounds of the Society, and the event will move indoors if the weather proves unkind. This is an excellent opportunity to revisit

your memories of Blackhall Place, while relaxing and catching-up with colleagues. Booking is essential.

For further information, including time and price, contact Sinead Travers (Law Society) at 01 881 5772 or email: [s.travers@lawsociety.ie](mailto:s.travers@lawsociety.ie)