

AP 179

17 May, 2002

## **NORTHERN IRELAND COURT CLOSURE WILL LIMIT ACCESS TO JUSTICE, SAY LAWYERS**

A leading lawyers' organisation has voiced its concern at Government proposals to close seven of Northern Ireland's local courthouses.

Backing a chorus of protests already voiced by residents, MLAs and other organisations, the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL) says closing the courthouses will leave the road to justice fraught with difficulty. And those who will be most affected, says APIL, will be people who are at their most vulnerable.

"People who have been injured through no fault of their own are often very traumatised so it's vital that the process of going to court is made as simple and stress-free as possible," said Robert Martin, APIL's representative for Northern Ireland.

"Closing the local courthouse will mean these people may lose an accessible route to justice. Travelling to another court in another town may sound easy, but what about those people with no transport or those with disabilities? There are mothers who will have to be at the school gate to pick up their children but won't be able to make it because they were forced to travel to another town. There are many people who cannot afford to pay for buses - the whole situation will be intolerable," he said.

A campaign to stop the closure of Limavady courthouse has been subject to debate by the Northern Ireland Assembly, and has gained backing from a multitude of supporters all rallying to keep their courthouse open.

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Secretary of Limavady Solicitors Association, Zephyrn Patton, who is behind the campaign, says support has been overwhelming.

"We are seeing just how strongly people feel about this issue," she said. "Limavady is the eighth most deprived region in Northern Ireland and, while we know our courthouse isn't perfect, the effect the closure would have on this town and its people would be disasterous.

"Our courthouse provides the community with a pathway to justice," said Zephyrn. "As well as creating severe practical problems, closing it down will further dampen the spirit of an already deprived town."

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