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Dornoch Sheriff Court is under sentence of closure

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A QUESTION MARK again hangs over the future of Dornoch Sheriff Court amid fresh claims this week that it is one of 20 in Scotland earmarked for closure in a cost-cutting exercise by the Scottish Court Service (SCS).

Highlands and Islands Labour MSP Rhoda Grant claimed to have knowledge of a "leaked document" outlining SCS's intention to close 20 of the country's 53 Sheriff Courts.

According to Ms Grant, among those affected would be Dingwall, Tain and Dornoch, leaving only two courts left within the North Highlands at Inverness and Wick.

However, a spokesman for the Scottish Court Service said the organisation had "no plans" for court closures, although it was in the process of reviewing its current services.

Doubts over the future of rural and underused

Scottish courts, some of which operate at 46 per cent under capacity, first began to emerge as far back as 2007.

A report in the Telegraph in 2009 claimed a radical, cost-cutting blueprint of court closures had been drawn up to save £4.75m a year and meet SNP spending targets.

In December 2010, Sutherland's JP Court, which was held in the Sheriff Court building, was transferred to Tain because it was felt the low level of business did not justify a separate court. Dornoch Sheriff Court is thought to be particularly vulnerable because it is open only four days a month - with two days reserved for criminal cases and two for civil. Last December the prospect of court closures again hit the headlines, fuelled this time by the "leaking" of a Scottish Court Service "internal policy document." Following

the latest leaked document, MSP Mrs Grant earlier this week criticised any move to shut down courts as "short sighted."

She said: "On the one hand the Government may save money by closing a court building, but they will not have made any real savings.

"That is because victims and other witnesses will have to travel further and longer to attend court, so there will be a dramatic rise in incidental expense claims by such people.

"This is not to mention increased costs for the extra distance accused persons will have to be escorted.

"There will also be knock-on costs to the police service where officers need to appear as witnesses - it will mean higher costs and less bobbies on the beat.

"We also have to remember that city courts like the one in Inverness is running at capacity as it is.

"The Government need to have a rethink

of this plan, carry out a proper consultation exercise and apply common sense and logic to such plans before they implement them."

Susan Whiteford, Head of Corporate Communications for the Scottish Courts Service, said: "The Scottish Court Service is facing a future where budget levels will reduce and there will be major service reforms arising from Lord Gill's review of civil courts, Sheriff Principal Bowen's review of sheriff and jury trials and recent recommendations announced in Lord Carloway's report.

"We have initiated a review which looks at what business should be done in different locations around the country and an internal discussion document was prepared to promote this conversation with SCS staff and

judicial members to help us discuss practical issues and to assist us to develop options for delivering the service in the future. As part of our fact-finding, we wanted to make sure we fully understood local issues and could take these into account along with other business analysis work we are undertaking.

"When this review work is complete it will be our intention to produce ideas for further discussion and at that stage we will want to involve a wide representation of interested groups and individuals to help us develop and improve our proposals.

"It is too soon to speculate on the future of any particular court but any proposal to close a court will require a full public consultation and a decision by the Scottish Parliament."