

# Jail cells could be turned into a honeymoon haven

By Iain Ramage

PEOPLE could soon be heading to their honeymoon – rather than a jail cell – from Dornoch court house.

The popular idea has surfaced from a day of public debate on the future use of the Grade B listed court complex which is due to close within a matter of weeks as part of Scottish Government budget cuts.

A community company interested in taking over the property has three weeks to decide if its ambition is viable.

Around 80 people expressed an interest by attending an hour-long public meeting in the courtroom itself on Tuesday night.

A greater number joined an earlier drop-in session to exchange ideas and discuss options for the building's future use should the community opt to buy it from the Scottish Courts Service.

It is axing the facility as part of streamlining that will see criminal cases switch to Tain Sheriff Court and possibly others in the north.

Jenifer Cameron, chairwoman of DACIC (Dornoch Area Community Interest Company) which hosted this week's events, told the Northern Times: "We had a very calm, considered, cautious and reasonable meeting and we had a very good turnout, which was nice."

The company outlined the buyout process and ideas already on the table along with the fresh feedback gleaned from the day's consultation.

It made the clear distinction between using the building as a "community centre" and its potential use for business purposes.

Mrs Cameron continued: "We would be buying it with a view to preserving the building as an important feature in the centre of Dornoch and any use that we do find for it has to pay its way."

"Ideas have included letting some of the rooms as office space to encourage business in the town while some have suggested the courtroom itself as a tourist attraction.

"A very popular idea is that the courtroom be used for registry office or civil weddings. Dornoch is a very popular wedding venue and it's widely felt that would be a real good addition to what's already available in the town."

Another suggestion was to create a botanic garden on the existing south-facing court house garden.

Other ideas included the establishment of a youth hostel in the wake of the recent closure of such accommodation at Carbisdale Castle.

The community company will now consider the ideas in detail and begin the task of costing the respective proposals.

The next stage would be to present a business plan to Scottish ministers.

It would then require a postal ballot, overseen



The future of Dornoch Sheriff Court is under review.

by Highland Council, in which half of the 2000 or so people on the local electoral roll would need to vote on whether to proceed with a buyout.

Of those, more than 50% would need to vote in favour for it to be considered by the government.

Scottish ministers have confirmed that the legal process is now active, allowing the community until 21st September to give formal notice

of community interest to buy the property. The Scottish Court Service has provided the company with a "substantial list" of outstanding maintenance needs, according to the company. Local tradesmen have, however, reassured the company that the place is in "very good order".

The market value of the building is yet to be established.