

Defendant Voice Engagement Panel HMCTS Update / 27.03.20

forwarded to IfJ by Olivia Jorgensen-Aitchison
(Basecamp) <notifications@3.basecamp.com>

I am writing to inform you of a temporary change to the way in which courts and tribunals will operate during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

As a result of the unprecedented challenges we are facing, we have [significantly increased capacity for phone and video hearings](#) to provide alternatives to face-to-face hearings. These will be used wherever this is suitable for the participants and for justice to be served. We have also implemented arrangements to ensure that essential work is prioritised.

In order to maintain a core justice system through the next months of the current public health emergency we are now taking further action to consolidate the work of our courts and tribunals into fewer buildings for the duration of the crisis.

These plans have been developed in close partnership with the judiciary and others in the justice system.

Fewer buildings for physical hearings

The changes we are introducing will ensure that those essential hearings that must be held in person can still go ahead while complying fully with public health advice for all those who involved, including court staff, judges, and legal professionals.

They will also enable us to ensure that sufficient social distancing can take place during hearings and at other times in our buildings, and help to make sure that our cleaning and security work is focused on fewer locations to ensure they are kept as safe and secure as possible.

Operating sites

From Monday, there will be two types of HMCTS operating sites.

The first is for in-person hearings which will be heard in a network of 157 court and tribunal buildings. These will remain open to the public for essential face-to-face hearings. They will also support video and audio hearings.

Media and interested parties will be able to attend physical hearings in these courts to uphold the principles of open justice and, where this is not possible, judicial consideration will be given to enabling them to join a hearing remotely or to receive a transcript afterwards.

These courts have been chosen to best ensure that the Chief Medical Officer's advice on social distancing can best be followed by all those using them and, by having fewer physical hearings in fewer courts, our cleaning and security contractors will be able to focus their efforts more effectively on creating a clean environment with handwashing and sanitising available, including supplies of soap and paper towels that will be checked every day.

Video and phone hearings

The second type of operating sites will be 124 'staffed' buildings that will be used only by HMCTS staff and the judiciary to carry out vital work. They will be closed to the public and professional users.

These buildings will support video and telephone hearings, progress those cases without hearings and ensure continued access to justice. In jurisdictions in which there are still paper-heavy processes, this arrangement will enable us to avoid moving large amounts of paper between sites.

As there will be no physical hearings at these sites and no access to the public, social distancing rules can be more easily enforced and our cleaning and security contractors can focus their work on those areas of the buildings that remain in use and providing handwashing and sanitising facilities, including supplies of soap and paper towels that will be checked every day.

Further information

Those 89 courts and tribunals not designated as open to the public or 'staffed' will be suspended from Monday and will not be used for the duration of the crisis.

The list detailing the effect of these changes on all courts and tribunals in England and Wales and HMCTS tribunals sites in Scotland is available [here](#).

Please note that this list is subject to change because of the nature of the public health emergency; [courts and tribunals finder](#) will be updated to reflect any changes.

Further information is available on our [GOV.UK](#) page on [courts and tribunals COVID-19 page](#) and in our [press notice, where you will also find the list of courts and tribunals](#).

For hearings that are already listed at courts that will temporarily close, we are already in the process of contacting the parties involved to clarify the new arrangements. Those hearings listed at priority or staffed buildings may be subject to change as we move to absorb work from those that are temporarily closing.

We are working through this as quickly as possible and will contact the parties involved should a change to their case need to be made.

I know we can rely on your patience and support as we put in place this significant change in the way we work. I am hugely grateful for all you have done so far to keep the justice system operating. We will and keep you informed as things develop and change; but do feel free to be in touch if you have further questions.

Please feel free to share this more widely.