

## COVID 19: LOCAL GUIDANCE FOR THE FAMILY COURTS OF STOKE-ON-TRENT AND STAFFORDSHIRE

27<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Issue 3

1. From Monday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2020, Stoke on Trent Combined Court Centre and Stafford Combined Court Centre will be temporarily closed to the public for family work. This means that there will be **no attended in person hearings at either Stoke or Stafford Combined Court Centres**.
2. Remote hearings will continue by telephone and “Skype For Business” supported by HMCTS staff who will continue to operate from the court building.
3. Applications can continue to be made to Stoke Combined Court Centre either electronically or by post and they will be dealt with by HMCTS staff in accordance with the current processes. **Anyone requiring an urgent hearing should contact Stoke Combined Court Centre by email or telephone for further advice and assistance.** Contact details are as follows:

Email: [family.stoke.countycourt@justice.gov.uk](mailto:family.stoke.countycourt@justice.gov.uk);

Telephone: [01782 854 000](tel:01782854000).

There will be no change to the process for issuing public law applications.

4. During this unprecedented time of crisis, the court must focus its more limited resources on urgent matters where there are safeguarding concerns about a child or vulnerable adult. We are therefore also taking the following steps with immediate effect:
  - All non-urgent adoption work will be adjourned until the current crisis has resolved. That includes applications for permission to defend an adoption and applications to revoke a placement order.
  - All non-urgent applications to discharge a care order will be adjourned.
  - All non-urgent private law work will be adjourned.
  - All non-urgent financial remedy work will be adjourned.

For all cases currently listed or awaiting a hearing date, a gatekeeping judge will review the file to determine whether or not the matter is deemed urgent and requires a listing. It is likely that only cases where there is an identified safeguarding risk to a child will be deemed urgent. If the case is adjourned, parties will have liberty to apply to the court for reconsideration of the decision. Any request for reconsideration must set out clearly why the urgent attention of a judge is required.

5. The default position will be that the following matters will now be dealt with exclusively by remote telephone hearings or “Skype For Business”, regardless of whether one or more parties is in person or evidence is to be heard:

- EPOs, ICOs, interim removals, secure accommodation applications and DOLs orders;
- Return hearings on Non-Molestation Orders granted without notice;
- Urgent private law matters;
- Court of Protection matters.

If any party does not consider a remote hearing to be appropriate in the particular circumstances of their case, suitable arrangements for the hearing will be made in consultation with the Designated Family Judge.

6. For matters which are currently listed, the Court will shortly be sending out standard orders to implement these decisions. If you fall within the general guidance above please do not contact the court to make enquiries about a specific case. HMCTS staff are working exceptionally hard to try and manage the lists in an ever-changing situation and individual queries are placing a significant burden on a workforce which is decreasing in number on a daily basis.
7. Once again can I thank everyone for their cooperation and assistance at this difficult time.

HHJ Harris

Designated Family Judge for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire