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COURTS AND  
TRIBUNALS JUDICIARY

Dear colleagues,

In the midst of this unprecedented public health crisis, I hope that the Easter weekend brought some respite from the current pressures both personal and professional. I know that the past few weeks have been exceptionally challenging for everyone involved in child protection and the administration of family justice and that the news from the Government last Thursday that the lockdown is to continue for at least a further three weeks will have brought further anxiety and concern. It is unfortunately likely to be some time until we can return to our normal working practices.

In light of the Government's decision to extend the lockdown period, I wanted to write to everyone involved in the delivery of family justice in Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire to express my enormous gratitude for the tireless effort that has been made and continues to be made on a daily basis to ensure the most vulnerable children are safeguarded at this difficult time. Despite the exceptional nature of the challenge we are facing, the family justice system continues to operate albeit we have needed to focus our efforts on those vulnerable adults and children deemed most at risk. Whilst delay for many children and their families is sadly now inevitable, I could not have imagined at the beginning of March that by the beginning of April we would be operating a remote family justice system as effectively as we are. That is entirely due to the exceptional effort and commitment of our two local authorities, Cafcass, the legal profession, HMCTS and my judicial colleagues who have worked together creatively, flexibly and with complete determination to find solutions to the logistical and practical problems we face. I am extremely grateful to everyone. I do however want to note my particular thanks to the front-line social work teams who have continued to carry out their core child protection duties and responsibilities despite the risks to their own safety and well-being.

Looking forwards, I am acutely aware that operating at 'crisis level' for a period of weeks will begin to take its toll. I know many people will be feeling exhausted at the continued effort. I hope that as we all become more familiar with the new ways of working it will become easier to manage. However, this is likely to be a situation that endures for some months as we move from the immediate crisis to focusing our efforts on recovering the inevitable backlog. It is therefore vital everyone looks after themselves and remains safe and well. I am currently meeting on a weekly basis with senior managers from all the partner agencies as well as representatives from the local Bar and solicitors' profession to try and manage the crisis as best we can. If there are any issues, concerns or suggestions that you feel could be helpfully addressed within that forum I would encourage you to contact me or your senior managers.

In the meantime, can I simply repeat my enormous thanks to everyone and wish you and your family my very best wishes.

HHJ Sonia Harris

Designated Family Judge for Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire