



JUDICIARY OF  
ENGLAND AND WALES

**HER HONOUR JUDGE WATSON**  
DESIGNATED FAMILY JUDGE FOR COVENTRY AND WARWICKSHIRE

26th May 2020

Dear All Local Practitioners,

I had hoped that I would be able to inform you that we would be taking face to face hearings in Coventry from 1 June but that is not going to be possible.

Your health and wellbeing must be our priority together with that of our staff and we cannot open the court building to the public until we are sure that we have done all we can to ensure yours and our safety.

Our provisional plan, which will be confirmed this Thursday, is that we will be opening the court from 22 June for very limited attended hearings.

Of the 10 judges' chambers and courtrooms in the court building only 4 will be open and for a maximum of 8 people in the larger courtrooms. To ensure social distancing, only 16 people will be allowed into the court building at any one time. This will inevitably mean some very significant changes.

We will be initiating staggered start times and on arrival you will be directed straight into the courtroom and to your seats. There will be some limited capacity for waiting outside court but not for conferences and discussions. Many conference rooms will be closed, and social distancing will be implemented throughout the court building. Ushers will be on hand to direct you. This means that preliminary discussions will have to take place before coming to court.

The courtrooms will be needed for both Family and Civil and the numbers of listed face to face hearings will consequently be significantly reduced. We have not yet been notified if any of our courts will also be needed for Crime.

Remote hearings by Skype for Business, Teams and in time CVP (Kinley Cloud) and BTMeet Me telephone conferencing are likely to be the way most family court business is done for the foreseeable future.

You can expect all case management hearings to continue to be remote.

We will be looking now at listed final hearings and others waiting to be listed to develop a priority of work and we will be looking at the possibility of conducting hybrid hearings, where some parties and witnesses attend in person and others by remote means.

What we would like you to do, is to help us do this, by actively considering your own cases and whether it would be possible to enhance the remote experience for vulnerable parties by offering support in accessing the technology from a solicitor's office, or barrister's chambers, attended by solicitor and counsel but practicing social distancing, or from Local Authority premises.

We will be listing cases for mention to look at the issues and whether time estimates can be reduced and whether it would be possible, by limiting witnesses and cross examination, perhaps dealing with some issues by submission, to deal with more cases remotely. The alternative could be considerable delay.

We would also like you to prepare, in advance of such a mention hearing, a Covid 19 Case Plan with a realistic witness template, indicating whether the witness will attend face to face or by remote means and specify how, and looking at the numbers of parties attending court each day. It would also help, if you could give your view as to the priority of the case, stating clearly whether the case needs to be heard urgently (red), or within 3 months (amber), or within 6 months (blue) and explain why. This will allow listing, in consultation with the trial judge, to manage the caseload.

The Magistrates are not able to open for face to face hearings at this time and in the first instance, private law work will be case managed by legal advisers and the Bench brought in remotely by BTMeet Me. With the assistance of CAFCASS, it is hoped that some cases which are solely related to Covid-19 difficulties, can be mediated and resolved by CAFCASS. You will notice that not all cases will be listed for FHDRA , only those where it is thought real progress can be made, again with the assistance of the CAFCASS Family Court Adviser, who will speak to the parties and judge / lay Justices. Other private law cases will be timetabled through to a Dispute Resolution hearing with directions given for section 7 reports and the filing of statements.

I fear this early phase in the Recovery Plan is going to be difficult for us all, but it does mean we can continue to deal with cases and make decisions for children which are timely and fair to all.

I am sure you will have questions, which you can direct to the trial judge at the mention hearing but we will be holding a virtual Court User Meeting by Teams on Wednesday 3 June at 4pm.

Yours sincerely

Hilary Watson