

## Staffordshire Recovery Plan

### Well-being and workload

6<sup>th</sup> July 2020

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to report that thanks to the hard work and commitment of everyone involved in the family justice system in Staffordshire, we are making very good progress at tackling the backlog in care proceedings and adoption. The attended courts are working well, and although the technology continues to throw up unexpected challenges, we are getting better at solving the various glitches. Hearings are generally running smoothly. The backlog in private law work remains significant, but we have introduced changes to the CAP system that are allowing us to make good progress in dealing with delayed FHDRAs and DRAs. We have also re-commenced final hearings (both fully remote and attended) and I therefore hope we will begin to see similar progress in reducing the private law backlog in the weeks ahead. We have also identified dates for the financial remedy work to begin. The progress we have made would not have been possible without the determination, perseverance and good will of all the partner agencies working together to find solutions to the many challenges we have faced. I am exceptionally grateful to everyone.

There are some updates to note to the operation of the family courts in Staffordshire. CVP (HMCTS's video platform for remote hearings) is currently being rolled out in the civil and family courts and we expect to be operational by Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July. CVP will replace MS teams or skype as the preferred video platform for remote hearings. Parties will be sent an invite to the hearing by email in the same way as invites are currently sent for MS teams or skype. All that is required is that the link is opened using Chrome as the internet browser. We are also expecting a new professionals' access scheme to be operational at Stoke Combined Court Centre within the next few weeks. This should enable all professionals to access the court building quickly and without waiting in line for security checks.

As we enter what is traditionally the summer holiday season, there is therefore a sense that things are settling down and we are beginning to get to grips with the enormous changes that COVID-19 has required to our day-to-day working practices. I am however acutely aware that we still have a long road ahead and are likely to face many more challenges in the weeks and months ahead. I know that the enormous effort everyone has made over the last 3 months to keep the system operational will now be taking its toll. Everyone is tired; many are exhausted. It is crucial that we are able to sustain the work we are doing. The health and well-being of everyone therefore remains crucial. Navigating our way through an unprecedented crisis makes welfare more, not less, important. I am aware that email traffic has become horrendous and am alarmed at the hours I know some practitioners and local authority lawyers are working.

With that in mind, and having consulted with members of the local profession, the following suggestions are made in the hope it may help ease some of the burdens:

- It is recognised that receiving late notice of hearings causes everyone enormous difficulties and exacerbates these issues. HMCTS are working hard to prioritise hearing notices to ensure that they are sent in a timely way.
- Effective advocates meetings can play a vital role. Online diary apps can be a useful tool in assisting the child's solicitor to arrange the meeting. Meetings should take place within normal working hours.

- In advance of the advocates meeting, the child's solicitor should circulate an agenda with all parties communicating in advance any issues that they wish to be addressed. The Local Authority should prepare a draft order as the basis for discussion.
- It is vital that everyone attend the meeting with clear instructions on the issues to be discussed.
- Advocates should try and reach a consensus as to the way forward. If possible, an agreed order should be finalised and submitted to the court for approval, allowing any subsequent hearing to be vacated.
- An effective advocates meeting should mean that in many cases pre-hearing discussions are not necessary. Duplication of work is to be avoided.
- Short form orders are strongly encouraged. Short focused orders save everyone time and are ultimately more helpful to the Court.
- There should be little work required to finalise an order after a hearing. The party with carriage of the order should simply be implementing the directions of the Judge.
- Do not copy everyone into emails unless it is essential. Although it sometimes feels awkward, there is no need to reply simply to say thank you!
- Try and remember that everyone is working extremely hard and doing their best to meet competing demands.

Given the enormity of the task we face and the systemic problems within the family justice system, I recognise these suggestions will not solve the day-to-day problems of managing what at times must seem an unmanageable workload. It is however important we do what we can. I therefore hope they are of some help.

Finally, I know that many will have had their holiday plans with family and friends disrupted. This year's summer will be very different. It is however vital that everyone has a complete break and is able to spend time away from work resting and recuperating. So please, shut down the computer, turn off the emails and have a very well-earned break!

HHJ Sonia Harris

Designated Family Judge for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire

6<sup>th</sup> July 2020