



HM Courts & Tribunals Service

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Mr Simon Davis
President
The Law Society

via email: simon.davis@lawsociety.org.uk

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Dear Simon

I would like to reflect to you how we are responding to the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic; and in particular, how we are ensuring that justice can continue to be done while taking public health, and the health of our staff and all those who work in or seek justice through our courts, as seriously as we clearly must.

I start by echoing both the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Chief Justice, who jointly lead HMCTS. The rule of law is absolutely fundamental to our democracy; and our courts and tribunals safeguard both those who come to them, and those who never need to, but who nonetheless lead their lives under their protection. They are a source of certainty and clarity in doubtful and difficult times; and in many ways, it is more, and not less, important that courts and tribunals are able to administer justice in times of trouble.

We are, though facing an unprecedented public health emergency, and that means that though justice must continue, it cannot continue as if nothing has changed. For that reason, under the leadership of the Lord Chancellor and Lord Chief Justice, we have developed an unprecedented response to the challenges that we have faced, and will continue to face.

The senior judiciary has given [guidance to the wider judiciary](#) encouraging the use of telephone and video to support hearings wherever possible, including for hearings where this might have been considered unthinkable even a month ago. HMCTS has also issued guidance to all of its staff and has developed, at pace, the ability to hear video and audio hearings in many more ways – with flexible phone conferencing details; the ability to link people into the Justice Video System in the criminal courts from any laptop; and the provision of Skype for Business for all judicial and staff laptops. These systems are coming into operation from now and you can see more [here](#).

We will continue to work urgently to roll out and support this and other new technology as quickly as we can. The speed at which we are moving to do things which would ordinarily involve extensive testing, training and slow roll-out means we should expect bumps in the road; I ask everyone involved to show tolerance and kindness to those doing new things at pace. The use of telephone or video in an individual case will always be at the direction of the judge, but I would urge all participants in hearings to embrace these options wherever they can.

As more people are affected by COVID-19, it is likely that we will have to make more choices about what work can be done. We have agreed a set of priorities with the judiciary, to guide decisions about what we will do, and you can see more on this [here](#). This will be updated as the situation develops. We are also making forward plans, including for how we might consolidate our work into fewer 'hubs' to maintain our work,

including that which is duly urgent and must be done physically, during the worst of the crisis.

I hope that this information is useful. We know that cleanliness and hygiene is another particular priority, and that we have not done well enough in some courts; we have put a number of additional measures in place across our buildings to address this. You can see more on this [here](#).

I cannot praise highly enough the efforts of my staff across all of our buildings who are doing absolutely everything they can, in the face of such a challenging situation, to keep the system running. I want to be absolutely clear that this cannot be a case of carrying on with business as usual. Extraordinary times call for an extraordinary response. HMCTS has changed the way that it works, and will continue to do so as this situation develops further. But to keep the courts and tribunals system running, so that justice can continue to be served for victims, witnesses and defendants across the country, we need everyone to play their part.

All of us involved in running the justice system often talk about the fundamental role that it plays in society and democracy. Far from being diminished, that role – and the role of other public services on which the country depends at times of trouble – is more important now than ever. The system relies, though, on all of its constituent parts to continue to function effectively. As Chief Executive of HMCTS, I want to do all that I can to help all of us address this challenge, and I look forward to continuing to work closely with you to that end.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Acland-Hood', written in a cursive style.

Susan Acland-Hood
Chief Executive, HM Courts & Tribunals Service