



Media Working Group

Tuesday 7 April 2020

In attendance:

1.0 Welcome

- 1.1 -- thanked and welcomed attendees to the meeting which had been arranged amid the impact of Coronavirus / CoVID-19 on court hearings and tribunals.

2.0 Current position and progress

- 2.1 -- outlined the current position and progress by HMCTS and Judicial Office (JO) in the roll-out of audio and video facilities in courts and tribunal buildings.
- 2.2 -- went on to provide an overview of the considerable challenge and urgent steps taken to prioritise and maintain hearings. He added that it was equally crucial to ensure that audio and video hearings could take place in a safe environment.
- 2.3 A decision on HMCTS estate was expected on Friday regards court and tribunal buildings. There will be 157 priority court and tribunal buildings open for essential face-to-face hearings. This represents 42% of the 370 crown, magistrates, county and family courts and tribunals across England and Wales
- 2.4 As well as the buildings that will remain open and operational to the public, some buildings will be open for HMCTS staff only and some will be temporarily closed. The up to date information is published on GOV.UK.
- 2.5 The court buildings are currently categorised as:
- Open courts – these buildings are open to the public for essential face-to-face hearings.
 - Staffed courts – staff and judges will work from these buildings, but they will not be open to the public.

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- Suspended courts – these courts will be temporarily closed.

2.6 -- stated that an operating model had been established and a support arrangement adopted to help facilitate the arrangements for buildings across the estate.

2.7 -- invited questions and observations from the Group.

3.0 Update from -----

3.1 -- stated that work was progressing to provide facilities to enable people to join hearings by audio and video. HMCTS was aware of the different types of hearings and of the individual requirements.

3.2 The response over the last three weeks has focused on supporting the judiciary, staff and court users as everyone gets to understand the new ways of working with the audio / video facilities.

3.3 From May optimum use will be made of the fully video hearings solution and this will continue to inform and improve from experiences of judiciary, staff and users to ensure audio and video technology can sustain the justice system.

3.4 The use of BT MeetMe teleconferencing is being increased from 995 accounts, covering 31% of courtrooms pre-CoVID19, to 3,391 in March covering all hearing rooms.

3.5 The firewalls on DOM1 have been removed for Skype for Business so that staff and judges can run remote video hearings with users outside of the HMCTS network.

3.6 The number of virtual meeting rooms within the MOJ's cloud video platform (CVP) have been significantly increased with 180 available for Tribunals, 200 for Civil and Family, 265 for Crime with an additional 100 in progress for sentencing hearings. To support the use of CVP rooms in the criminal courts, the number of users that can 'dial-in' to a hearing using the existing Justice Video System (JVS) is also being increased.

3.7 The number of licenses required to 'dial in' to a JVS hearing without being at one of the endpoints in Crown Courts, Magistrate Courts or in the RCJ has been increased from 100 to 500 over the last two weeks

4.0 Views from the Group

4.1 -- asked the Group on their opinion of what was going well, or not so well.

4.2 -- asked whether we had the number of hearings that had involved remote media access and -- stated that it was not feasible to capture such information.

4.3 -- said that journalists she had consulted did not always know how to request remote access arrangements from individual courts as there was no consistent guidance. -- also added that cases were going through the courts without the media having any prior notice, and she said she would be raising the issue at a national ----- she was part of. She said there ought to be national guidance issued.

4.4 -- advised the Group that he was gathering information on how to cover court proceedings remotely and said there should be more consistent guidelines operated by courts to ensure that the media were provided with the appropriate information.

4.5 -- reported a mixed position with some courts, like Bristol, having a contact to assist with court lists and to advise on court access. Sheffield, Leeds, Northampton, Norwich and Teesside Crown Courts use video conference.

4.6 A number of members raised concerns that cases appearing before magistrates' courts were often not listed. -- was preparing a document on these issues and undertook to forward a copy to --.

4.7 In response to a question from -- on physical attendance, -- stated that the Press Association was currently not advising its reporters to attend hearings in person.

4.8 -- and -- said that it was often difficult to get access to Magistrate Courts to make a request to gain remote access. -- added that sometimes it was only possible to contact Magistrate Courts by E-mail to make an application or for lists. Unless there was a designated contact to deal with applications, or staff available late in the day to help with the list, the request would not be facilitated. -- also stated that the sound quality at some Magistrate Courts was very poor.

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- 4.9 -- stated that it was very difficult to get listings from court staff. Some staff appeared to be very resistant at releasing lists, particularly at Magistrate Courts. -- suggested that HMCTS should circulate a message to ----- about this. This was endorsed by --.
- 4.10 -- highlighted the impact on students taking the journalist courses if the situation was long term and access to listings and courts continued to be difficult.
- 4.11 -- raised concerns of the potential of dialling into the a 'wrong' meeting when in a private part of a hearing.
- 4.12 -- thanked members for their comments and promised to look at how we could improve the operational arrangements to improve media access.

5.0 Close

- 5.1 --- thanked everyone for their contribution at this meeting. She added that whilst HMCTS staff at all levels were stretched at this time, the issues raised at the meeting around Magistrate Courts, guidelines for staff and all the strategic issues discussed would be picked up.
- 5.2 In response to queries from -- around public access to courts and jury trial, -- stated that this Group would only focus on media access. He added that a fully remote arrangement for jury trial could not work.
- 5.3 -- thanked attendees and stated that a further meeting would be arranged in approximately two weeks.
- 5.4 Meeting closed.

ACTIONS:

- 6.1 Operational guidance issue to all courts was issued on 16th April 2020 alongside op note to the media creating:
 - a) A consistent way for the media to request remote access from particular courts;
 - b) A national helpline number to enable the media to elevate requests that were not picked up in a timely way;
- 6.2 Guidance was issued on 22nd April to all magistrates' courts to ensure that "overnight lists" were issued to the media as well as regular, daily lists.
- 6.3 Representatives of the media working group were invited to submit written submissions to the working group on restarting jury trials chaired by ----- ----. A meeting with ---- took place on 14th May. JO op note to the media issued on 17th May.