

Court to enhance social distancing measures

The following is issued on behalf of the Judiciary:

The Judiciary today (December 1) announced that in view of the latest public health situation and related developments, social distancing measures will be enhanced from December 7 onwards to ensure that the courts can carry on business as safely as circumstances permit.

Court business is an essential public service which enables the effective and efficient administration of justice. The enhanced social distancing measures seek to compress crowd gathering and people flow in court premises. This will inevitably reduce the number of court hearings and volume of business handled by the registries and accounts offices of courts/tribunals.

Court proceedings

Court hearings will generally continue to proceed as scheduled. Parties to proceedings should work on the basis that court hearings will proceed as scheduled unless directed otherwise by the court. If there are changes, parties will be given specific directions by the court.

For civil proceedings, there will be greater use of alternative means where appropriate, including remote hearings (using video-conferencing facilities or phones) and/or paper disposal. The court will give directions for individual cases in this regard.

To maximise the use of courtrooms, the sitting hours of court hearings may be changed. For example, subject to the court's directions, half-day sittings may be adopted, with the sitting hours adjusted to 9am to 1pm for morning sittings and 2.30pm to 5.30pm for afternoon sittings.

For new jury trials and new death inquests involving juries scheduled to commence from December 7 to end December, parties will be contacted by the court in due course as to whether re-listing will be required.

Handing down of High Court judgments

From December 7 until further notice, parties of High Court proceedings need not come to the court to collect judgments. The judgments will, as far as practicable, be uploaded onto the Judiciary's website within the same day when they are handed down. For cases with great media or public interest, the judgments will continue to be uploaded onto the website immediately after handing down. Hard copies of the judgments will be sent by ordinary post to the parties who have not come to the court to collect the judgments.

Registries and accounts offices

From December 7 onwards, the registries and accounts offices of all levels of courts will reduce their operating hours to 8.45am to 12.30pm and from 2pm to 5pm (Monday to Friday, except public holidays). As a result, the capacity of the registry and accounts services will be reduced. Delays are expected.

There will be crowd control at the registries and accounts offices with social distancing requirements throughout the opening hours. While there will be no ticketing system, special queuing arrangements at designated areas or other crowd management measures will be put in place where necessary.

From December 7 onwards, the area of the Probate Registry will be expanded to LG4 of the High Court Building so that registry business can be conducted in a more spacious area. Court users will be given specific instructions to go to the appropriate area.

The Judiciary appeals to all court users to avoid coming to the registries/accounts offices at peak hours, e.g. late mornings and late afternoons.

Supportive offices of the Judiciary

From December 7 onwards, the offices that provide support services to court users and the public will reduce their operating hours as set out at Annex. The counter service of the Complaints Office will also be suspended until further notice.

Preventive and crowd management measures

The Judiciary will continue to strictly enforce appropriate preventive and crowd management measures, including mandatory body temperature checks, requiring all people to wear surgical masks at all times unless otherwise directed by judges or judicial officers and reducing seating capacity of courtrooms, court lobbies, registries and accounts offices by half, etc.

Parties, legal representatives and court users who have fever or high body temperature, who are subject to any quarantine requirement, medical surveillance or compulsory testing while waiting for test results; and/or who are preliminarily tested positive or tested positive for COVID-19 are not allowed to enter Judiciary premises. They should apply to the court as soon as practicable for permission of absence or inform the court with reasons for absence as appropriate.

For enquiries regarding the above arrangements, court users may call the following hotlines during office hours:

- General Information: 2869 0869
- Court of Final Appeal: 2123 0123
- High Court: 2523 2212
- Probate: 2840 1683
- Competition Tribunal: 2825 0426
- District Court: 2845 5696
- Family Court: 2840 1218
- Lands Tribunal: 2771 3034
- Labour Tribunal: 2625 0020
- Small Claims Tribunal: 2877 4068
- Magistrates' Courts: 2677 8373
- Obscene Articles Tribunal: 3916 6303
- Coroner's Court: 3916 6204
- Bailiff Section: 2802 7510
- Court Language Section: 2388 1364

The Judiciary will continue to post updated information, including Daily Cause Lists, all arrangements in relation to Judiciary business and advice to court users, on the Judiciary website (www.judiciary.hk). Court users are strongly advised to check the website for updated information before they come to court.