

# More face-to-face hearings as courts reopen

- A further 16 additional courts to reopen this week

159 HM Courts & Tribunals Service (HMCTS) locations have remained open throughout the pandemic and a further 9 have opened in the last few weeks. This, together with the significant increase in use of remote audio and video technology, has enabled the justice system to continue functioning in these exceptional circumstances.

Now, 16 more sites have been assessed as suitable to hold socially-distanced hearings. These are spread across the country and across all jurisdictions. Each building has been individually assessed and will strictly follow public health guidance to ensure the protection and safety of all court users. A full list can be found below.

Lord Chancellor, Robert Buckland said:

Throughout the coronavirus outbreak, court staff and the judiciary have worked tirelessly to make sure justice has not stood still and I'm pleased that we are now in a position to reopen more of our buildings.

A functioning justice system is one of the hallmarks of a healthy democracy and today's update will give confidence to people up and down the country that justice can continue to be done in a way that is safe for all court users.

Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, Lord Burnett of Maldon said:

This is a very welcome step towards reopening all our court buildings. A remarkable volume of work has continued throughout the lockdown, much of it being conducted by judges from home.

Reopening all of the court estate, using additional accommodation and continuing to use technology imaginatively will enable us to return to and surpass pre-lockdown volumes, helping manage the growing caseload.

The Senior President of Tribunals, Sir Ernest Ryder said:

All of the Tribunals in the UK are open for business and we have been able to provide an impressive service during the Pandemic by working remotely. The re-opening of tribunal buildings is welcomed.

It will allow us to add to that service for those cases which are not best suited to remote methods of hearing, where face to face determination by a tribunal panel is important.

We will continue to develop the technology that has been introduced for use in remote hearings and in our buildings and we will use this opportunity to increase the number of panel hearings that take place.

The dedication of all those in the justice system has allowed people across the country to continue to access the justice they are entitled to while being protected against the spread of the virus, and many thousands of court hearings across all jurisdictions have been heard since the coronavirus pandemic began.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government and the Judiciary have announced through HMCTS:

There are now 184 court and tribunal buildings open for essential face-to-face hearings, representing 54% of the 341 crown, magistrates, county and family courts and tribunals across England and Wales.

Work has also begun to identify suitable venues to house so-called 'Nightingale' courts. These would use public spaces, such as civic centres or university moot courts, to allow traditional court buildings to manage more work while maintaining social distancing – whether that be by hosting full hearings or allowing victims and witnesses to attend remotely. A working group has been established to develop these plans, made up of HMCTS officials, the judiciary, legal professional bodies, representatives of victims' groups and other court users.

## **Notes to editors**