

Statement from the Lord Chancellor on the resumption of jury trials

A well-functioning justice system with the Rule of Law at its heart is one of the hallmarks of a healthy democracy like ours. Throughout the coronavirus outbreak court staff and the judiciary have worked incredibly hard to uphold the delivery of justice. This is not least to ensure the safety of those who most need our courts – among others the vulnerable women and men protected by Domestic Abuse Protection Orders and children removed from dangerous situations through Child Protection Orders.

Keeping these vital services running has necessarily meant huge changes to ways of working right across the wider courts and tribunals system, including a significant increase in the take-up of remote technology.

Despite the considerable challenges, many thousands of hearings across all jurisdictions were heard over the last month.

Around 90% of those hearings utilised audio and video equipment by the end of April and 159 priority courts and tribunals have remained open for physical hearings. This was achieved at locations from Tyneside to Truro and Cardiff to Kent by following strict public safety advice, but to date has not included jury trials.

I am pleased that the courts are now in a position, with approval from Public Health England and Public Health Wales, to take some first steps towards the resumption of jury trials. A limited number of trials will take place, conducted safely and observing social distancing rules, at courts including the Old Bailey in London and at Cardiff Crown Court. These will also help us to understand how it might be possible to conduct trials more widely as the situation with coronavirus develops.

Any person who plays a part in a criminal trial – including victims, witnesses, jurors, and legal professionals – is making a huge contribution to society that is rightly recognised as an essential reason to leave their home. They have our gratitude and they deserve our protection – and measures are being put in place to support everyone who comes to court, in whatever capacity, to do so without putting themselves at unnecessary risk.

I am extremely grateful to the Lord Chief Justice, the wider judiciary, legal professions, court staff and colleagues from across the Criminal Justice System for their determination and resolve in the discussions to get us to this point. Coming together in that spirit of collaboration will ensure that justice can continue to be done in a way that is safe for all court users.