



Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice
The Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
By email
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29th May 2020

Dear Lord Chancellor,

As you will be well aware, the Covid-19 crisis continues to have a significant impact on every part of the country, including the Criminal Justice System (CJS). I am aware that the Government is currently juggling a wide range of competing and important priorities. However, I am concerned that there is not yet enough urgency of effort in the criminal justice system to avert a crisis that could take years to resolve, letting down countless victims in the meantime.

In West Mercia we currently have a backlog of more than 1,200 criminal cases awaiting court hearings. I acknowledge and respect that courts sitting in traditional ways is currently impossible due to the pandemic. However, despite several conversations with senior officials I do not have confidence that there is a plan in place to address that growing backlog. As such, I also have serious concerns about the consequences should the backlog continue to grow. It is clear that Coronavirus will continue to impact the CJS for some time to come. Without a clear plan and urgent action to address the issues we risk creating a situation that may take years to recover.

There are currently no Crown Court trials running in West Mercia and only a handful of Magistrates' Court cases are being heard. As the Courts are at a standstill, I feel we need to consider multiple options to address the growing backlog of cases. Options might include temporary spaces where trials could be heard, increased use of remote evidence, additional courts being put on to reduce the backlog, weekend courts and so on. Unfortunately the implementation of any of these options is beyond my remit alone and progress has been seemingly non-existent through other avenues.

The impact on victims and witnesses is only going to get worse the longer the recovery phase is delayed. Victims and witnesses are already experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety. We collectively owe it to them to expedite a coordinated response to addressing the issues affecting the CJS, and ensure that a challenging situation is not allowed to spiral out of control.

While these are undoubtedly immediate challenges and risks, I do also believe that the situation presents opportunities for reform that may be of benefit to the CJS in the long term, beyond the current crisis. The CJS has been slow to embrace technological solutions which could be used to address some of the issues linked to social distancing.

I am aware, as you will be, that there are victims and witnesses who need to self-isolate during the crisis. A flexible and pragmatic approach is needed in allowing them to provide their evidence from a safe place to ensure the CJS does not fail these people who already face an extended wait for access to justice.

Clearly the existing Courts' infrastructure is not designed to cope with social distancing, so we collectively need to explore alternative and virtual spaces that can be used in the interim until the crisis passes.

As you will be aware, I have championed the use of video enabled justice across West Mercia, recently funding a new video remand suite. I have also funded five remote Live Link sites, increased capacity around victim services and consistently offered support to all partners to enable the CJS to increase its functionality. I feel that I am doing my utmost to assist the CJS during the crisis, and of course am willing to do more, but regret that it does not feel other parts of the system share that commitment or sense of urgency.

The CJS is a complex web of partners, roles, budgets and priorities. Progress and reform is notoriously slow. I fear this is not a situation where we have that luxury of time. I therefore write to ask the Government for any support you are able to offer in co-ordinating and driving forward an urgent and effective system wide response to these issues. I would ask you to urge your officials, either centrally or in the region, to engage positively with a view to enabling courts to convene and carry out their vital work, ensuring access to justice is properly restored, and preventing a major issue for the CJS in the near future.

On behalf of the communities I represent, I would be grateful for any support you can urgently lend to these matters. Please do let me know if there is anything more I can do to support the recovery phase, which I remain committed to entirely.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Campion". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

John Campion
Police and Crime Commissioner
West Mercia