



Ministry
of Justice

The Right Honourable
Robert Buckland QC MP
Lord Chancellor & Secretary of
State for Justice

Sir Bob Neill

Justice Select Committee Chair
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

11 May 2020

Dear Bob,

RESUMPTION OF JURY TRIALS

Throughout the coronavirus outbreak, court staff, the judiciary, legal professionals and all those who support people coming to court, have worked tirelessly to keep the wheels of justice turning, and turning safely, for those who need them most. I'm writing to you in your capacity as Chair of the Justice Select Committee.

Since the start of the pandemic, we've worked closely with senior judges in making decisions to ensure we prioritised the most urgent cases and used our courts and tribunals in the most effective way to support them.

These decisions have resulted in huge changes to our ways of working, including far wider use of technology to allow the continued running of as many hearings as possible, remotely. Some hearings have continued to take place in person by following public safety advice, introducing additional cleanliness and hygiene measures, and observing strict social distancing rules in all our buildings that are open to the public. But to date that has not included jury trials.

I am delighted that following the Lord Chief Justice's earlier announcement, which I whole heartedly support, the courts are now in a position to take some early steps towards the safe resumption of jury trials, with approval from Public Health England and Public Health Wales.

I'm hugely grateful to Mr Justice Edis and those on the jury trials working group for bringing us to this point, and for their ongoing work that will enable us to understand how it may be possible to conduct trials more widely going forward, when safe to do so.

The judicially-led group, which has been considering ways to safely restart jury trials when the time is right, includes representatives from the Law Society, Bar Council, Criminal Bar Association, HMCTS, Crown Prosecution Service, Prisoner Escort and Custody Service, Ministry of Justice, HM Prisons and Probation Service, National Probation Service, National Police Chiefs Council and Legal Aid Agency. I'd like to say thank you to them all.

At the recent oral evidence session on the impacts of COVID-19 on the court system, your Committee asked about what resources will be made available to deal with a backlog of Crown Court trials caused by the pandemic. Let me reassure you that we are planning for the next phase of the pandemic as well as for longer-term recovery. We have already brought system leaders together to set up the CJS Strategic Command (CJSSC) which, along with, the Criminal Justice Board will give thought to a systems-wide approach. HM Courts & Tribunals Service is also working in close partnership with judiciary to react quickly to changing circumstances and has started to review how current plans can be flexed in the face of changes to current restrictions or in terms of the work that we can start to cover again should those restrictions be relaxed. This prepares us for a medium-term period during 2020, so that our plans can flex should restrictions relax or tighten.

Safety will of course remain paramount always and those buildings that hear jury trials will continue to follow the clinically-informed Government guidelines of the day at all times.

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.

Yours ever

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Buckland". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letters of each word being capitalized and prominent.

RT HON ROBERT BUCKLAND QC MP