

## Attendance at Reading Crown Court 27<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> May 2020

As some of you will be aware I attended trial last week at Reading Crown Court for an appeal against conviction in a sex case that started life in the Youth Court. This was a return from Lesley Manley. This meant I was unable to do the jury trial I was co-defending in with Mike Fullerton as it was listed the same day as the appeal despite assurances from the court the jury trial would not get listed until June. Michael Polak took over the jury trial from me at short notice. I say all this as it transpired that all defence counsel in both trials listed that day, the first trials since the lockdown came from CCC. A not insignificant fact when you consider that Reading was one of only 7 courts in the whole of England and Wales trying to get jury trials running again this week.

The first thing I noticed upon entering the court was how few people there were. I tried to use my “professional entry” ID card from the MyBar portal, however the Reading ID reader did not recognise my card, which is odd as my ID is valid until April 2021.

There are direction signs on the floor for people to stay to the left of the main corridor. Access to the robing room is still via a keypad. I did notice a cleaner cleaning door handles around the court building, however in three days I was there I did not see him in the robing room. It may be he cleaned the door handles there when we were in court. The robing room had been cleared of all abandoned papers and there was a large bottle of antibacterial hand sanitiser sitting on the table by the “exhibit” computer terminal, which had been switched off. You now notify the court clerk in order to be logged in.

The toilets are as pre-lockdown. They have been cleaned, but the old and inefficient hot air hand dryers remain in situ, including those that didn’t work before the lockdown. This would suggest there is no funding in place to replace these old machines and they remain as they were.

When you went into court there was another bottle of hand sanitiser, which you were encouraged to use. The conference room I was assigned appeared to be the former witness service room as it was larger than the average conference room, which I made plain I could not use given I had a young appellant, a social worker, interpreter and solicitor in attendance. The room was large and it too had a bottle of hand sanitiser.

There is no water available at the court at all, so I found I could only remain hydrated if I brought about 3 large bottles of water with me each day.

My overall impression was that the court building was clean and that remained my impression over the three days. This was helped by the fact there were only two trials going on the building and one or two others advocates turned up for their various mentions.

If one were to ask what extra money has been spent then the impression I got was that the only visible expense was one cleaner on hand all day, bottles of hand sanitiser (as opposed to wall mounted dispensers as one sees in hospitals) in each court room, conference room and robing room and some limited use of tape on the floor to encourage people to stay one side or the other of the main corridor on the ground floor.

The effort to get the court up and running in this limited form is genuine. That two trials completed is a credit to all concerned. This is however set against the fact that the court building covers 5 floors, there are 6 court rooms and there is one lift.

For those involved in the jury trial I was told they were in court 6 (a large open court) on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor and the jury were spread out across the jury box and alongside and behind counsel keeping 2m apart. For the jury to assemble took about 15 mins as they had to use the lift 2 at a time. I also understand court 5 was also used to assist with the jury trial in court 6.

That's all I can give information wise. Each court throughout the country will have its own unique challenges, however given what I saw at Reading and the lack of any real change to the court furniture, then I would hope many courts of the same size could at least run 2 jury trials. Other court rooms could deal with mentions etc. The success of this will depend on Judges allowing as many cases as possible to be dealt with remotely. This will reduce the number of advocates attending in person, which is key to keeping the "risk" we all face as low as possible. We all accept that for many of us getting to and from court on public transport will probably pose more of a risk.

We also all accept that there is a need for many of us to get back to work and it will be for each of us to assess whether attending court during this pandemic is worth that risk or not.

Finally the trip to Reading felt as safe as it reasonably could do given so few people were using the trains.