

Dorset Criminal Justice System COVID Recovery

Criminal justice partners from across, Hampshire, Wiltshire and Dorset together form the Wessex Criminal Justice Recovery Group. The Dorset Criminal Justice Board (DCJB) has prioritised responding to COVID and returning capacity as quickly as possible.

Current position

- Court performance across the South West region is comparatively good when set against other court areas; however, there continues to be significant delays. Recovery continues to be the main priority for all DCJB meetings
- All Crown Courts Centres across the SW of England are now open. For Wessex Region, this means that seventeen jury trials are running across Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, Wiltshire and Dorset at one time. Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS) and the local judiciary are working through the outstanding cases and looking to increase capacity further over the coming months.
- HMCTS continue to work with partners to utilise further capacity by opening additional magistrates' courts on Saturdays
- COVID secure measures in place in courts which include estate alterations, strict social distancing, face coverings, plexiglass screens, and building flow measures. Extended court opening hours, allowing two court sessions a day, are being piloted first in Portsmouth
- The receipt of cases through the court system has broadly returned to the pre-covid levels; however, there remains a larger number of outstanding cases in the system. Social distancing measures within Court premises directly affect the number of jury trials.
- Dorset magistrates' courts are managing a large number of outstanding cases. One of the contributing factors behind this is legal advisors availability. HMCTS are moving resources and awaiting the arrival of newly recruited legal advisors to address increase demand.
- Victim and Witness services caseloads are approximately 50% higher than March 2020 as increased number of outstanding cases. PCCs / Forces have increased resources to maintain quality of service.
- Forces, CPS and HMCTS are working together to prioritise more offences associated with high risk of harm and those involving vulnerable victims such as domestic abuse.
- Defence firm representatives are linked in to the local area recovery forum and the legal aid agency are proactively working to engage defence support for Saturday courts.
- Nationally there are 11 outbreaks of COVID in prisons and 50% of prisons are on higher alert. There remain challenges in enabling face-to-face or video enabled legal visits.
- Probation, Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC) and Youth Offending Services are conducting more face to face contacts where possible. The highest risk cases were prioritised during lockdown, and since then local work stepped up to re-establish contact with the next tier of offenders. This is now showing an improving picture with breaches now being listed by the courts.

Next steps

- Continue to work through local challenges in capacity to reduce outstanding cases and delays, including delivering the National Court Recovery Plan. It is the collective ambition of DCJB that by December there will be more court capacity in the SW than before COVID.