

His Honour Judge Bedford  
Designated Family Judge for Sussex

21 December 2020

Dear all,

It's some months since I inflicted one of my bulletins upon you. I thought it might be useful to catch up as the year closes.

We are all tired after a very difficult year and the latest developments over the last weekend do not bode well for any relaxation of our new ways of working as we go into the New Year.

At the risk of using words which have been worn smooth by overuse, I think it is important that I state in the clearest possible terms that the local judiciary has nothing but the greatest admiration for the way in which you have all reacted to the unprecedented events of recent months.

Nine months ago, few of us had taken part in any sort of remote hearing beyond the occasional case management hearing by telephone. Nine months later, we are achieving more sitting days than ever and are gathering remotely several times a day in different combinations of personnel, and with far more flexibility, than we could have ever imagined.

We have done our best to achieve fairness for those we serve and I genuinely believe that the family justice system in our area has performed as well as any other area in the country. Our statistics in both private law and public law stand up to scrutiny and show that despite all the challenges of the last nine months, family justice continues.

As we look to the future, I can see a world where most of our case management hearings take place remotely but I genuinely hope that we will get back to having face-to-face hearings when evidence has to be heard. That said, I am far more comfortable than I ever thought I would be with hearing witnesses remotely and, in circumstances where that is fair and efficient, I see no reason why we should not continue with that in the longer term.

You will be aware that the working groups set up by the President to consider improvements to the way we work in both private law and public law, have now reported.

I appreciate, as I have set out above, that we have all experienced a lot of change during recent months and I have to say that my appetite for further change is not great! Having said that, there are some good ideas in the papers and we need to look at them carefully and work out what we can adopt and adapt for Sussex. The local family justice board will be doing exactly that and I shall be looking carefully at the proposals at the very start of the New Year. My initial reading of the papers suggests that we are already doing much of what is recommended and so I suspect any change will be by way of evolution rather than revolution.

Having mentioned the local family justice board, may I take this opportunity to thank the members and regular contributors for the enormous amount of work which they have done over and above that which we have all been facing in our day-to-day professional lives. Adam Smith and Andrea Holtham have worked particularly hard to keep the board active. We missed our annual training day, which is always a great event and which will be reinstated next year, but part of the gap has been filled by the twilight training sessions which are already up and running.

Similarly, I must thank those who organise the Quality Circle which is recognised by the President as being an excellent initiative and those of us who attend know how stimulating the discussions are and how they feed into recommendations being made by local family justice board and which are then taken into account by myself so far as I am able.

The challenges we have all faced would have been so much more difficult had it not been for the hard work and loyalty of HMCTS staff. They work in miserable conditions and are undervalued, in my view, by their employers. A number of you have been in touch to express your gratitude to them and I can tell you that each and every such message is received with delight. It is important for us to remember that they are working in an under resourced environment and that they are doing their best.

Finally, and most importantly, may I mention and thank the social workers and guardians who are working on the front line with families and keeping children safe, in circumstances where that work has been made even more difficult by the restrictions imposed during the pandemic.

I think that is about all I have to say at the moment. I hope you will take from it the praise to which you are entitled, as individuals and as a group, for all that you have achieved in your professional lives this year. I really do hope that next year is much better for all of us. Whatever the New Year brings, I am convinced that we are better prepared for it than we could have ever imagined being only a few months ago and that we will continue to do our best by the families we work for.

So, give yourself good festive break, take a rest and allow yourself a few treats!

I look forward to seeing you all in the New Year.

Best wishes,

Robin Bedford