

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19): UPDATE

10 December 2021

On 9 December 2021, the Executive published a [joint statement](#) outlining the next steps aimed at tackling the Covid-19 Omicron variant. In light of this it is considered important to restate the position for courts, as understandably queries may arise. The overriding objective is to ensure that the administration of justice continues to be delivered within a safe environment.

The steps suggested by the Executive include the importance of everyone following the public health advice, maximum adherence to the rules that are in place (including the wearing of face coverings which is mandatory in certain settings), the taking of regular Covid-19 lateral flow tests if mixing with other people, and maintaining social distancing. It is important that these steps are followed by those attending court buildings to ensure they continue to be safe spaces which are compliant with the public health guidelines.

It has been brought to our attention that physical attendance at courts has increased, particularly by persons who have not been required to attend by the judge. Not all practitioners have been completing HR1 and HR2 forms which are essential to enable court managers to manage footfall. **Legal representatives and those involved in proceedings should only attend in person when required by the judge and where it is in the interests of justice and safe to do so. They should collaboratively complete and lodge the relevant forms (which are published on the Judiciary NI website) in advance of a substantive hearing (ie one which is likely to last one hour or more) or where required by a judicial office holder to attend.** The list of attendees provided by practitioners will be shared by the court office with the judge and if anyone attends in person who is not on the list or has not received prior approval, it will be brought to the attention of the judge.

Each courthouse will have different types and volumes of court business running each day and managers will be able to advise on what can be facilitated while managing the overall footfall in courtrooms and public areas of the court buildings. Only those persons (professional and public) who are required by the judge to attend in person may be admitted to the courtroom. Where a person attends a court building without their attendance being planned in advance, G4S in compliance with guidance, will be instructed to direct the person to the door of the courtroom and advise court officials. Court staff will then liaise with the judge to determine whether they should be permitted access.

Face coverings **must** be worn in public areas and must also be worn during proceedings unless a judge directs an individual to remove their mask. Legal representatives and parties who are required to attend court should only attend shortly before the time allocated to their case and should leave immediately afterwards to avoid unnecessary footfall in the court building. It is essential that all those attending sit on designated seats (which have been set out in compliance with court risk assessments) and do not rearrange the seating.

All arrangements will be kept under review. Further detailed guidance can be found [here](#).