

Justice Minister: Media Played Vital Role Reporting On Riots

Op ed by Justice Minister Heidi Alexander MP

The principle of open justice – that justice must be done and be seen to be done – is fundamental to our legal system. Openness is the default position of our courts, tribunals and the national services that support them. The general public has a right to know what happens in them.

In the UK, 96 per cent of adults watch, listen or read news in some form. According to latest Ofcom reports, traditional news platforms score higher on trust, accuracy and impartiality than social media. These large audiences not only demonstrate the demand for trusted and accurate reporting but highlight the vital role of journalists in keeping the public informed about crucial issues affecting their communities and country.

Through HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS), we provide journalists with access to hearings, trials and supporting information, in particular case details, outcomes and reporting restrictions. Almost any news bulletin demonstrates the combined efforts of journalists and operational teams to make this information public and, perhaps more importantly, to make it digestible.

The media have worked closely with HMCTS over the last few years to improve the ways in which HMCTS provides information. As a result, improved media handling guidance for staff is now published online. More recently a new dedicated and centralised contact number for media queries in the magistrates' court has been set up. This month, HMCTS has introduced - for the first time - new daily Crown Court media registers. Circulation lists are currently being built to ensure they reach you.

While I recognise that the independent judiciary and other justice partners also each play a crucial role in upholding the principle of open justice, as Courts Minister I know there is room for improvement when it comes to some of the practicalities of accessing hearings, systems and the information you need to do your job. I fully support HMCTS in everything it is doing to address these – invariably frustrating – challenges.

The importance of factual and accurate reporting was brought into sharp focus following the Southport attacks in July and subsequent civil disorder, with misinformation and hate being spread online. At a time when the response of the criminal justice system was under enormous scrutiny, it was important for the public to see and hear about justice being done; that crime leads to punishment and that criminal activity has consequences.

I'm hugely grateful for the vital role the media played at the time, and indeed subsequently, in reporting on hearings and the sentences of people involved in the riots.

I want to thank journalists and news organisations for their unfailing work. Following cases through the system, attending and observing hearings, requesting and verifying details – all before independently and accurately reporting, often to very tight deadlines – is no mean feat.

I'm also grateful for the work undertaken by independent judges to progress the issues of transparency and openness. I know this is an area that the Lady Chief Justice is committed to and I look forward to seeing how this is developed through the judicial Transparency and Open Justice Board.

As you've heard from others this week, this Government understands the impact of SLAPPs and strategic 'lawfare' on the media, as well as victims, and is committed to considering the best options to tackle this abuse of our legal system. We must remain mindful of the need to strike an appropriate balance between access to justice and freedom of speech, which we'll reflect in any future action.

I'm committed to understanding your needs, and considering ways which will improve processes and support you to provide this important public service. By supporting the visibility of the work of our courts and tribunals, we support the rule of law and give the public – at home and around the world – confidence in our justice system.

I'm grateful to you all for your incredible efforts, dedication and hard work.