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### **'Court and arbitration proceedings during the Covid-19 crisis in the UK'**

As of early May 2020, the UK was one of the countries hit hardest by the Covid-19 crisis. It has reported the fifth largest number of Covid-19 cases in the world, and some 44,000 deaths. Like many countries, the UK government has ordered a nation-wide lockdown. The public was required to stay at home and non-essential shops were closed. Meanwhile the government has worked to ensure that the justice system remains functioning during social distancing.

A network of "priority courts" have remained open across the country. In London, the Supreme Court building has been closed until further notice. While the Royal Courts of Justice – which house the High Court and the Court of Appeal – have remained open, they are operated by a skeleton staff of senior administrators. Therefore, most commercial disputes are heard via audio or video link by default, and face-to-face hearings are held only where essential.

To support these measures, the judiciary has issued three new practice directions: PD51Y provides for hearings to be conducted remotely; PD51Z stays certain proceedings relating to possession of lands for 90 days; and PD51ZA provides for time extensions of 56 days in certain circumstances.

For arbitral proceedings, the London Court of International Arbitration has remained operational, but its staff has been working remotely since 19 March 2020. Filings are made through the court's online filing system or by email. Likewise, documents and correspondence relating to ongoing arbitrations, as well as arbitral awards, are communicated electronically. The LCIA has also, together with other major arbitral institutions, issued a joint statement expressing their commitment to supporting the international arbitral community's ability to ensure that cases are heard without undue delay.

On 23 April 2020, the Government also designated certain lawyers and legal professionals as "key workers", who are entitled to priority access to testing for Covid-19.

Despite these arrangements, commercial parties seem nonetheless to have delayed bringing non-urgent legal disputes. The number of new court claims filed in the commercial courts fell by fifty percent in the run-up to Easter, compared with the same point last year.

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