July 2020

Thank you for contacting me about family justice.

The family justice system is responsible for making decisions that change lives, and the complex decisions of the court can have far-reaching implications for those involved. We must ensure that the system is delivering the best outcomes for children and families, while protecting those most vulnerable.

The Government has been undertaking a review into the treatment of victims of Domestic Abuse and their children by the family courts. Last year, Ministers announced a public call for evidence led by a panel of experts to gather information to help us better understand victims’ experiences of the system, and to make sure they never feel re-traumatised by the process. The panel held a call for evidence over the Summer of 2019, receiving responses from over 1200 individuals and organisations. The final report was published in June 2020.

The expert panel found that an adversarial process in the family courts often worsened conflict between parents, which can retraumatise victims and their children. I welcome the fact that as a response, the Government has announced major changes to family courts to protect domestic abuse victims.

Measures include, providing victims of domestic abuse with access to separate building entrances and waiting rooms as well as protective screens to shield them from their alleged abuser in court. Ministers have announced that there will be a trial of a new investigative, problem solving approach in private family law proceedings. This could allow judges to decide what evidence to investigate instead of both parties providing their cases against each other.

You may be pleased to hear that Ministers will also make it easier for judges to issue barring orders to prevent abusive ex-partners from bringing their victims before the court over and over again regarding child arrangements.

The welfare of the child is the paramount consideration for the court when making a decision that will affect a child’s life, and I fully support the child-centred approach that our family justice system takes. Of course, there is no doubt about the importance of fathers in the upbringing of their children.

Courts apply the presumption of parental involvement in a child’s life unless there is risk of harm to the child. Orders limiting such involvement to indirect contact are usually reserved for cases where face-to-face contact is deemed unsafe. Such orders are relatively rare, and the court will not take the decision lightly.

I welcome the fact that the Government has announced a review into this issue. Ministers will assess whether the correct balance is being struck between the risk of harm to children and victims, and the right of the child to have a relationship with both parents. As I am sure you will agree, this is a sensitive issue and requires careful consideration. I will closely monitor developments.

Thank you again for taking time to contact me.



Yours faithfully,

**CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP**

**MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR DAVENTRY**