

Landmark bill to deliver swifter justice for victims

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Faster and fairer justice for victims is at the heart of the Courts and Tribunals bill.

- Courts and Tribunals Bill puts victims at the heart of a faster, fairer courts system
- Government sets out pragmatic package of court reform to turn the tide on years of neglect
- Highest ever investment so Crown Court can sit unlimited sitting days and run at maximum capacity next year
- Only reform, investment and modernisation will deliver the Government's Plan for Change to fix the justice system

Faster and fairer justice for victims is at the heart of a new bill introduced in Parliament today (Wednesday 25 February), as the government delivers on its Plan for Change to repair the justice system after years of neglect.

The Courts and Tribunals Bill sets out a pragmatic reform of the criminal courts, and structural changes to the criminal justice system as a result of increasing charges, and a much greater volume of complex cases involving more digital evidence.

Currently 80,000 cases are waiting for justice, nearly 20,000 have been waiting for over a year, including around 2,000 rape cases. The average length of time to complete a Crown Court case is now 255 days, and for adult rape cases is 423 days.

And for the first time ever, Ministers have launched a new website detailing the scale of the challenge faced in our Crown Courts – and how only reform will reduce demand and deliver faster justice for victims. The data, independent audited by Hartley McMaster shows that without structural reform or increased spending, projections show the backlog continuing to grow across this decade: reaching around 130,000 cases by 2030 and 200,000 by 2035. Doing nothing would mean longer waits, more collapsed trials, more criminals roaming the streets, and more victims walking away from the system entirely.

As Sir Brian Leveson concluded in his independent review, investment alone cannot fix a system designed for the 20th century. Only structural reform – alongside investment and efficiencies – can tackle the backlog and deliver the swifter justice victims deserve.

Among the pragmatic reforms included within the new Bill is handing power to judges to decide where cases are heard, ending the ability of criminals to game the system by dragging out proceedings and tormenting their victims.

These measures address fundamental changes to how the criminal justice system operates in the modern era and a failure to renew justice at the pace the modern world demands. Police are arresting and charging more people and in the digital era cases have been increasingly complex with 90% of all crime having some form of digital evidence.

Deputy Prime Minister, David Lammy said:

The criminal courts we inherited were on the brink of collapse, with victims waiting years for justice while the backlog spiralled out of control. For too long, victims have paid the price for a system left to crumble by those who should have acted to reform our justice system for the modern realities of crime.

Our courts reform will deliver record investment, serious reform and practical modernisation to get cases heard faster, protect jury trials for the most serious crimes, and set us on a path to turn the corner on the rising backlog by the end of this parliament. This is the only way to deliver the swift and fair justice victims deserve.

The Bill will also allow technical and lengthy fraud cases to potentially be heard by a judge alone, freeing up jurors from the personal and financial burdens created by complex, months-long trials.

Alongside this the legislation will create a new Bench Division where cases with a likely sentence of three years or less will be heard by a judge – estimated to take 20% less time than a jury trial. Jury trials will be guaranteed for the most serious offences, including rape, murder, aggravated burglary, blackmail, people trafficking, grievous bodily harm and the most serious drug offences.

Magistrates will be able to hand down sentences of up to 18 months – with the Government also taking the power to increase that to two years if needed – freeing up Crown Court time for the most serious offences.

They are pragmatic and are essential to tackling the crisis in our courts and restoring confidence in a justice system that is faster and puts victims first.

The new bill comes as the Deputy Prime Minister set out his vision for the justice system. New measures include a National Listing Framework to standardise court listings and end the postcode lottery for victims.

Alongside this, the Government will support the courts and the judiciary in clearing older cases through “Blitz” courts – bringing similar cases together over a short period of time by concentrating court resources and the expertise required.

This week, the Government also confirmed a landmark agreement for every single Crown Court in England and Wales to be funded to hear as many cases as possible next year so victims can see justice done – and more offenders face the full force of the law.

This investment, the highest ever given to the courts, will also mean the magistrates’ courts will also be funded to its highest operational capacity.

A further £287 million will be invested in the fabric of the court estate itself- almost 50% more than last year - to deliver vital repairs and bring the system into the 21st century.

The new bill also includes:

- Replacing the automatic right of appeal in magistrates’ courts with a new filter to check claims to better protect victims.
- New rules on giving evidence to tackle harmful myths influencing trials, with special measures made easier for victims to access and practitioners to navigate.
- Repealing the presumption of parental involvement from the Children Act 1990, ensuring courts focus on what is best for the child, protecting children from abusive parents.
- Bringing tribunals under unified leadership of the Lady Chief Justice, supporting career

development and recruitment for staff.

- Additional powers allowing magistrates' expenses rules to be updated more easily, ensuring they reflect modern working patterns and the changing profile of those serving as magistrates.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-bill-to-deliver-swifter-justice-for-victims>