

Press release: Justice Secretary Elizabeth Truss unveils landmark Prisons and Courts Bill

- Historic Prisons and Courts Bill will transform the lives of offenders and put victims at the heart of the justice system, helping to create a safer and better society.
- New legislation underpins measures outlined in the ground-breaking Prison Safety and Reform White Paper, which will transform how our prisons operate.
- Modernisation of our courts will improve access to justice, better protect the vulnerable and further enhance our status as a world-leading centre for dispute resolution.

Justice Secretary Elizabeth Truss today (23 February 2017) unveiled the historic Prisons and Courts Bill, paving the way for the biggest overhaul of prisons in a generation and the delivery of a world-class court system.

This key piece of legislation will underpin measures in the recently published Prison Safety and Reform White Paper, and will help transform how our prisons are run. Prisons will punish people who break the law and give offenders the skills they need to turn their lives around, driving down the £15 billion annual cost to society of reoffending.

It sets in law for the first time that a key purpose of prisons is to reform offenders, as well as punish them for the crimes they have committed.

Victims and vulnerable witnesses are also central to the Prisons and Courts Bill, with a range of measures that will bolster their protection in court.

The government is giving courts the power to put an end to domestic violence victims being quizzed by their attackers in the family courts, calling time on what the Justice Secretary has described as a “humiliating and appalling” practice. This follows an urgent review she commissioned last month.

Car insurance premiums will also be cut by around £40 a year, with new fixed tariffs capping whiplash compensation pay-outs and a ban on claims without medical evidence, helping to crack down on the compensation culture epidemic.

Justice Secretary Elizabeth Truss said:

Prison is about punishing people who have committed heinous crimes, but it should be a place where offenders are given the opportunity

to turn their lives around.

I want our prisons to be places of discipline, hard work and self-improvement, where staff are empowered to get people off drugs, improve their English and maths get a job on release.

Our courts should be places where victims get the justice they deserve, and where our outstanding independent judiciary can flourish and focus on the cases that matter.

Changes announced today build on and underpin measures contained in the Prison Safety Reform White Paper, which highlights how the government will drive reform in our prisons.

Governors will take control of budgets for education, employment and health and they will be held to account for getting people off drugs, into jobs and learning English and maths. Data for league tables detailing how prisons are performing in these areas will be publicly available from August 2017.

Across the country, more than 2,000 new senior positions are being created for our valued and experienced officers to be promoted into. These posts, which include specialist mental health training, will have a salary of up to £30,000.

Prisons and Courts Bill measures relating to courts underline the government's commitment to victims and the most vulnerable, as well as improving the system for those who use it every day. We are making our courts more open and modern to help cement our place as a world-leader.

Key measures within the legislation will make our courts swifter, more accessible and easier to use for everyone. They will be efficient and fit-for-purpose, with facilities across the entire estate that are modern, user-friendly, and work in favour of our dedicated judges and magistrates.

The use of virtual hearings will be extended, allowing victims to take part without running the risk of coming face-to-face with their assailant. Many hearings, such as bail applications, will be resolved via video or telephone conferencing, allowing justice to be delivered more swiftly.

Offenders charged with some less serious criminal offences, such as failure to produce a ticket for travel on a train, will be able to

- plead guilty online
- accept a conviction
- be issued a penalty and
- pay that penalty there and then.

And businesses will be able to recover money much more easily, with digital services that allow them to issue and pursue their cases quickly. This will give them vital confidence to do business here, and will enable our world leading justice system to remain the international destination of choice for dispute resolution.

Justice Minister Sir Oliver Heald said:

Britain has the best justice system in the world, but it should also be the most modern, because we have a vision for a justice system that truly works for everyone. Victims and the most vulnerable are at the centre of our changes, which will help deliver swifter and more certain justice for all.

We want courts that are efficient and fit-for-purpose, with facilities across the entire estate that are modern, user-friendly, and work in favour of our hard-working and dedicated judges and magistrates.

The Prisons and Courts Bill underpins this vision – building on the good progress we have already made in improving the experience of all users and cementing our reputation for global legal excellence so we can go on attracting business to the United Kingdom.