

Press release: Prisons and Courts Bill to improve access to justice and better protect the vulnerable

Plans to revolutionise the courts to make them more straightforward and efficient, and deliver swifter justice for victims, will be outlined by the Justice Minister Sir Oliver Heald QC today.

The Prisons and Courts Bill, which also contains a range of measures to help boost the reform of our prisons, will be debated by MPs in the House of Commons this week (week commencing 20 March 2017).

Measures in the ground-breaking Prisons and Courts Bill will mean that more cases can be progressed securely online and through video and telephone conferencing, eradicating the need for many administrative hearings to take place in the traditional courtroom setting and reducing the need for travel.

To ensure justice is also open and seen to be done, video booths will be installed in courts across England and Wales to allow members of the media and public to observe virtual hearings from court buildings anywhere in the country. Lists and results of cases that have taken place online, as well as those concluded in a physical courtroom, will also be available digitally.

Justice Minister Sir Oliver Heald QC said:

Britain has the best justice system in the world, but it should also be the most modern. 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 victims get the justice they deserve as quickly as possible.

The Prisons and Courts Bill proposes an extension to the use of video links and virtual hearings which allow victims to take part in cases without having to meet their alleged attacker face-to-face.

Under our virtual hearings measures a further 60,000 pre-trial hearings in the magistrates' court and 17,000 contested bail hearings can also take place by video, along with 30,000 pre-trial hearings in the crown court. This will

save around 34,000 hours of courtroom time. Proposals to introduce online convictions for some limited offences will also benefit the courts. Potentially around 8,000 offences – including 7,000 cases of people travelling without a train and tram ticket, and a further 1,300 cases of people fishing without a licence – could be handled online, taking away the need to be in a courtroom.

Bill measures will also mean around 420,000 summary and triable either way offences can be progressed without the need for administrative hearings to take place in a court. For example, offenders will be able to enter a plea online reducing the need to go to court until they need to attend trial or a hearing where they can be sentenced.

Discussions between the court and legal representatives about issues such as trial location will be able to take place via email or telephone or video conferencing, instead of being in a courtroom.

The government is also removing the requirement for indictable only offences to have a 'first appearance' in the magistrates' court, instead sending those cases straight to the crown court.

The Prisons and Courts Bill underpins our investment of over £1 billion for a modern justice system. The government is investing over £850 million to modernise and digitise the courts, and preserve the full majesty of the physical courtroom for cases that require it, in addition to around £250 million to deliver a fully connected criminal courtroom. This will result in savings of £252 million a year for the taxpayer.

We will move from too many underused and badly maintained buildings to fewer, better buildings with modern facilities. More modern and robust technology will be put in place in courts, such as Wi-Fi, modern telephony and screens for sharing evidence, to make the lives of our excellent judiciary and legal professional users easier.

The Prisons and Courts Bill also provides courts with the power to put an end to domestic violence victims being cross-examined by their alleged attackers in the family courts, calling time on what the Justice Secretary has described as a "humiliating and appalling" practice.

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.

In addition, the legislation sets in law for the first time that a key purpose is to reform offenders as they are punished for the crimes they have committed.

Notes to editors

1. [The Bill](#) was introduced on 23 February 2017. Follow its progress on the Parliament website.
2. Recent announcements:

3. [Impact assessments](#)