

Press release: Trio of justice bills become law

- mobile network operators now able to directly block phone signals in prisons
- drivers to see lower car insurance premiums as a result of fewer spurious whiplash claims
- judges' time will be freed up to focus their expertise on the most important issues

Illicit mobile phones in prisons will be blocked, motorists will save money through lower car insurance premiums, and courts will run more efficiently after the bills all passed Parliament on the final sitting day before Christmas recess.

Justice Secretary David Gauke said:

These important new laws will help us to deliver safe, decent prisons and a fair, efficient justice system that puts the people who use it first.

Days like today show that – despite the current squeeze on Parliamentary time – this is a department getting on with business as usual and delivering real change.

The Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Bill means mobile network operators can now detect, block and investigate illegal phone use in prisons – joining the government in the fight against criminals who fuel violence behind bars. The Secretary of State will be able to authorise mobile network operators to interfere and block phone signals in all prisons across England and Wales.

Prisons Minister Rory Stewart said:

A mobile phone in prison effectively allows a prisoner to jump the prison walls: they can transfer money, record videos and intimidate witnesses.

I thank my colleagues Maria Caulfield MP and Baroness Pidding for their work in sponsoring this Bill, which will help us to find and seize these illicit devices.

This is just one in a series of measures we have implemented this year, showing our commitment to restoring stability and security to the prison estate.

This builds on legislation delivered earlier this year by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), including the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Bill which doubled the maximum prison sentence from 6 to 12 months for anyone found guilty of assaulting a prison officer. MOJ has introduced a number of other additional measures throughout 2018 to restore stability to the prison estate, including a £70 million investment in safety, security and decency. This includes £16 million to improve conditions for prisoners and staff and £7 million for new security measures, such as scanners, improved searching techniques, phone-blocking technology and a financial crime unit to target the criminal kingpins operating in prisons.

Meanwhile prison officer numbers are rising, with more than 4,300 now recruited and staffing levels at their highest since 2012, and there has been a significant focus on prisoner rehabilitation. The launch of the Education and Employment strategy this year created a system where each prisoner is set on a path to employment from the moment they arrive in custody.

The Civil Liability Bill, also passed today, will ensure spurious or exaggerated whiplash claims are no longer an easy payday. Compensation will be capped, and settling claims without medical evidence will be banned – with insurers promising to pass on savings to hard-pressed motorists through lower insurance premiums.

The Bill also makes important changes to how the personal injury discount rate is set. Under the reforms, the rate will be reviewed in a more regular, transparent way, ensuring claimants suffering life-changing injuries still receive full and fair compensation. The changes will also reduce the burden of over-compensation on defendants, in particular the NHS, and will make the system fairer for all – including taxpayers and motorists.

The third bill passed today, the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill, will allow appropriately qualified and experienced court and tribunal staff to deal with routine matters, freeing up judges' time to focus their expertise on matters that need it most. It will also allow the judiciary to be flexibly deployed across jurisdictions where they are most needed, allowing judges to gain experience of different types of cases, helping with their career progression.

Justice Minister Lucy Frazer said:

This Bill supports our fundamental transformation of the justice system, making courts easier to use, more efficient and fit for the digital age.

By enabling judges to hear cases in different jurisdictions and giving court staff powers to deal with routine issues, we will make our courts more efficient and effective, while making better use of taxpayers' money.

As well as delivering new laws in Parliament, MOJ has introduced a wide range of other measures throughout 2018, including:

- A Victims Strategy, which ensures support for victims is aligned to the changing nature of crime, and boosts services at every stage of the justice system.
- A Female Offender Strategy which delivers dedicated support to vulnerable female offenders – diverting them away from short prison sentences wherever possible. This includes £5 million of funding in community services as well as establishing five pilot residential women’s centres across England and Wales.
- Increasing transparency of the parole process, by legislating to allow the Parole Board to provide summaries of its decisions to victims, media and the wider public.
- Launching a consultation on no fault divorce, to remove the acrimony created by forcing couples to attribute blame when a marriage ends.
- Move more court processes online, saving time and money as part of the government’s ambitious £1 billion court reform programme, bringing new technology and modern ways of working to the justice system. This includes a new fully accessible online civil money claims service giving the public the ability to make small claims online – with more than 37,000 claims made since its launch in March and user satisfaction at 90% – and a new system for applying for divorce online, which has cut errors in application forms from 40% to less than 1%.
- Introducing the ‘Upskirting’ Bill, protecting victims by making this invasive behaviour a criminal offence punishable by two years in prison.