

'Super courtroom' opens in Manchester

Press release

More victims, defendants and witnesses will receive faster access to justice when the first ever 'super courtroom' opens in Manchester today (10 September).



- More suspected criminal gangs can face justice in a larger courtroom
- HM Courts and Tribunals Service triples the size of a courtroom to speed up justice for victims
- Latest step in national effort to tackle the impact of the pandemic on our justice system

Manchester Crown Court has been revamped to create a space that is three times the size of a usual courtroom – allowing for trials with up to 12 defendants, which usually involve gang-related crime such as county lines drug trafficking, murders, and money laundering.

The trials that require this level of space – known as multi-handers – have built up during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the need for social distancing. The super courtroom will create the space needed to get through these cases at speed, while preventing disruption to other cases in the building.

The court will make best use of HM Courts and Tribunals Service's (HMCTS) rapid rollout of remote technology since the pandemic hit. This means that defendants can continue to appear remotely by video. More importantly, it also makes it possible for vulnerable witnesses and victims to relay their evidence from outside the courtroom, reducing the potential distress caused by being in the same room as the defendants.

Courts Minister, Lord Wolfson QC, said:

This super courtroom is just the latest step in our efforts to tackle the impact of the pandemic on our justice system.

It will get gang-related suspects in front of judges quicker –

sending a message to would-be criminals that the justice system stands ready to hold them to account.

We're not stopping here, though, and continue to pursue every option as we reduce delays and deliver speedier justice for victims."

Today's announcement forms part of the significant action taken to ensure the courts can operate at full throttle to recover from the pandemic and tackle delays. This includes:

- modifying 71 courtrooms to hold large multi-hander trials
- setting up Nightingale courtrooms across the country to increase capacity and ensure more trials can be heard – with a commitment to extend 32 courtrooms that deal with criminal trials until March 2022
- working to reopen an additional 60 existing Crown courtrooms following the lifting of most restrictions – including social distancing – in England and Wales
- ensuring there is no limit on the number of days that Crown Courts can sit for this year
- putting in place measures to make over 300 jury trial rooms available to safely run trials
- hosting more than 20,000 hearings using remote technology each week (across all jurisdictions) – a huge rise from a standing start in March 2020.

The impact of these measures is already being seen. England and Wales were among the first major jurisdictions in the world to resume jury trials, while latest figures show the number of outstanding cases has dropped by tens of thousands in the magistrates' courts since last summer. Cases dealt with in the Crown Court remain at around pre-COVID-19 levels, and we're listing thousands of cases each week.

Notes to editors

- Manchester Crown Court (Crown Square) has 15 courtrooms. Court 4 has been refurbished and extended to create the 'super courtroom'. The existing 14 other courtrooms will continue to deal with criminal cases alongside this.
- Prior to the expansion of court 4, a 12-defendant trial would have used up two or three courtrooms, sometimes for several weeks.
- Work continues for a second super courtroom site at Loughborough Magistrates' Court. We anticipate this will open in the autumn.
- The rollout of remote technology permits the attendance of parties and witnesses on video, where appropriate and in the interests of justice.
- Plans for more courts to reopen to help recover from the COVID-19 pandemic were [announced in July](#).
- The Lord Chancellor recently set out his plan for court recovery in a [speech delivered to the Law Society](#).

Car salesman fails to pass on £750,000 to customers

Steven Edwin Prosser (60), from Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, was appointed a director of Sell Your Car With Us Limited in May 2016. The company sold second hand cars and traded from premises on Hare Street in Buntingford, Hertfordshire.

Three years later, Sell Your Car With Us entered into liquidation in September 2019. The company's insolvency, however, triggered an investigation by the Insolvency Service who uncovered several instances of misconduct caused by Steven Prosser.

Sell Your Car With Us entered into agreements with customers to sell their vehicles for a commission before paying the customers within 14 days of the completed transaction.

Investigators, however, found that at least 48 customers did not receive any returns following the sale or disposal of their vehicles and Sell Your Car With Us failed to return vehicles to customers who requested their cars back.

While Steven Prosser failed to pass on payments to customers after he sold their cars, he transferred more than £125,000 from Sell Your Car With Us' account. Over £52,000 went direct to the used car salesman, £6,000 to a separate company he was a sole director of, and nearly £67,000 went to third parties connected with Steven Prosser

Steven Prosser sold two of the cars despite knowing the company was insolvent and, on several occasions, either failed to record any of the sales officially in the company's books and records or retain an invoice or bank receipt after a sale. At the date of liquidation, 48 customers submitted claims totalling just over £751,000.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy accepted an undertaking from Steven Prosser after he did not dispute that he failed to ensure Sell Your Car With Us Limited adhered to the terms and conditions contained within its Sale or Return Agreements in respect of Sellers' vehicles.

His disqualification came into effect on 11 August 2021 and Steven Prosser is banned for 9 years from acting as a director or directly or indirectly becoming involved, without the permission of the court, in the promotion, formation or management of a company

Katie Legge, Deputy Head of Insolvent Investigations, said:

Close to 50 people thought they were entering into legitimate agreements to sell their cars through a recognised dealer. But Steven Prosser failed to carry out his side of the bargain and sold their cars, while failing to pass on more than £750,000 to his customers.

Thankfully we were able to uncover Steven Prosser's misconduct and 9 years is a substantial amount of time to be removed from the corporate arena. Steven Prosser's disqualification should serve as a warning that we will bring action against rogue directors who mistakenly believe they can do as they please.

Steven Prosser is from Broxbourne and his date of birth is May 1961.

Sell Your Car With Us Limited (Company Reg no. 10192699).

Persons subject to a disqualification order are bound by a [range of other restrictions](#).

Further information about the work of the Insolvency Service, and how to complain about financial misconduct, is [available](#).

You can also follow the Insolvency Service on:

[Parole Board Member's Blog – September 2021](#)

You don't know what you don't know. Parole Board members face that issue in every case they review. Our job is to consider risk and whether a prisoner needs to stay in prison for the protection of the public, or whether they can be released safely after serving the minimum term set by a judge. So, the question is about future risk, and whether someone is likely to present a risk of serious harm after they are released. How can you predict the future? Every case that comes before the Parole Board starts with a review of the papers. This is the evidence presented by the Secretary of State for Justice and includes hundreds of pages of information from the entirety of the offender's time in prison. The papers also include any statements victims of the prisoner want the Parole Board to consider and any evidence or comment that a prisoner or their solicitor would like the Parole Board to see.

So, on the initial evidence, we only know what we are told. We still don't know what we don't know. But you need to know what you don't know and that is why members are trained to explore and discover, as far as they can, the unknowns about a prisoner. The evidence presented in the papers may lead to questions that need to be asked. Members can direct that further evidence is

produced or that specialist assessments are completed. For example, in a case I reviewed, the sentencing judge spoke about a diary that the prisoner had kept at the time of his offending. The judge had seen it, he made comment about it, but there was little else about it in the written evidence. I directed that the diary be produced. It was copied from the court archives and provided for the Parole Board. It offered a lot of information that was relevant to the consideration of risk.

The analysis of written evidence at the initial paper stage of a prisoner's review is done with great care and often leads to questions and the need for further information. The scrutiny of the material and the production of further evidence helps in the assessment of risk. So, in that early stage of the process, we are starting to find out what we don't know.

As well as finding information from the past, we also explore the present. Reports about custodial behaviour and courses that have been completed will help in the understanding of current risk, but we can delve deeper where we need to. For example, in a case where a prisoner presented a risk in relationships, I directed that transcripts of his telephone calls from prison were produced. The review of that evidence established that what he was telling some people was very different to the conversations he was having with his partner. There was a risk that needed further examination and members of the Parole Board can consider these things and can test all of the evidence by questioning witnesses, including a prisoner, at an oral hearing.

If further issues arise during an oral hearing and throughout the process members can and do continue with questions, including whether there remains a need for further evidence. So now maybe, we are starting to know more about what we didn't know.

But can you predict the future? The offences committed by prisoners who come before the Parole Board are some of the most serious crimes in the country. The consequences of making a wrong decision are severe, so we need to be confident in the decisions that we make. Understanding the past and the present allows members to better define what the behaviours or circumstances might be in a prisoner's life that would present a risk to the public if release were to be directed. We want to be sure that all areas of risk have been properly identified, that, where necessary, appropriate treatment or courses have been completed in custody, and that potential problems in the future can be spotted by those managing an offender in the community.

We will look at how well a prisoner might be likely to manage themselves safely and how effective the proposals from Probation will be in monitoring and managing risk. The Parole Board will also approve or revise proposed licence conditions. For example, in a case I reviewed, there was a concern about how well the prisoner might comply with some of the restrictions of his licence. Failing to comply would not create an imminent risk but people would need to know if his resolve to do well was failing. The addition of GPS tracking and a requirement to present himself twice a day to his designated accommodation ensured that Probation could keep a careful check on his progress. He was released safely and completed his licence without issue.

The more ways there are to spot warning signs, the greater the likelihood that action can be taken to return a prisoner to custody before there is any imminent risk to the public. The number of prisoners released by the Parole Board who go on to commit a serious further offence is less than 1% of the number actually released. By exploring and delving into what we don't know, panel members are better placed to assess and consider risk.

[New data sharing agreement to boost partnership working](#)

Sharing the YJB's 'summary disproportionality tool' will allow police and crime commissioners (PCCs) to analyse the cohort of children in their areas and spot if there are any disparities. This will serve to increase their understanding of any local issues or concerns and encourage them to collaborate with the relevant agencies in order to address any disparity. For example, this intelligence could be used to target funding for local initiatives that have a track record of addressing disproportionality. It could also feed into the work of local Crime Reduction Boards as well as the development of local/regional disproportionality action plans.

On using the tool, Norfolk PCC Giles Orpen-Smellie said:

Ensuring that all children are treated fairly by the criminal justice system must without question be a priority for all agencies who work in this area. My team has been able to use the disproportionality tool and data to produce a report on ethnic disproportionality in the youth justice system in Norfolk and shared this report with our local youth offending team (YOT).

In turn, the YOT have used this data to make a series of recommendations for the future, including upskilling staff in identifying and eliminating bias, the establishment of a multi-agency group responsible for developing a local joint disparity protocol and continuing to collect and analyse data to understand where disparity is occurring.

My office will also continue to use the tool and similar data sources when designing future youth interventions.

This data sharing agreement is partly in response to the Young Review and its [audit of Police and Crime Plans](#). Back in 2017 it was noted many Police and Crime Plans made no explicit reference to race equality and improving outcomes for ethnic minorities, though the audit did identify examples of where PCCs were driving progress on equality. Four years later, following the

YJB/APCC data sharing agreement and with many new PCCs elected, there is work underway to ensure they are all aware of the tool and are using it.

Merseyside's PCC Emily Spurrell said:

Understanding disparities in the criminal justice system is crucial if we are to ensure we have fair and efficient processes and to help restore confidence and faith in the system. Historically this has been hard to do due to inconsistent recording across all the agencies.

The Youth Justice Board's disproportionality tool is a helpful and effective way to review the data specifically in relation to young people who become involved in our criminal justice system. It will enable us to identify potential issues and ensure we can take action if there are any concerns that young people from specific communities are over-represented.

As Chair of the Merseyside Criminal Justice Board, I am keen that all agencies in our region monitor proportionality in our criminal justice system and this tool will ensure we can do this more effectively, helping to drive improvement and uphold standards.

In April, representatives from PCC areas attended a training session on the summary tool. The tool was also part of the induction for new PCC's at a 'Meet the Partners Event' in July and it will be discussed at the next APCC General Meeting, in October.

Alison Lowe, Deputy Mayor of West Yorkshire – and the APCC Lead on Equality, Diversity, and Human Rights – said:

Following the Lammy Review underlining the importance of data in tackling race disparity in the criminal justice system, I encourage all PCCs and Deputy Mayors to access the data available in the YJB's Summary Disproportionality Tool.

The wealth of data that the Tool contains will greatly help to inform our thinking as we develop our Police and Crime Plans, hold forces to account, and identify what we can do locally to address race disparity in the youth justice system, and ensure fewer children become involved in crime.

Keith Fraser, YJB Chair, said:

I really welcome this new data sharing agreement with the APCC and the exciting possibilities it brings for further partnership working. I believe it will prove to be a huge stride towards improving the life chances for children and preventing them from

being drawn into the criminal justice system.

With access to the summary tool, PCCs will now be better able to interrogate the evidence and reveal whether children from ethnic minorities are over-represented in their area. And if the evidence points that way, then there is huge potential for PCCs to forge new alliances with local community-based groups and help to build trust, as they seek to explain 'why it is happening' and 'what can be done about it'.

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Ofsted and HMI Prisons say it is time to give prison education 'the attention it deserves'

Ofsted Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman and Chief Inspector of HMIP, Charlie Taylor discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on prison education in a [joint commentary published today](#).

The commentary also announces the launch of a new review of prison education, with an initial focus on reading.

The impact of COVID-19

The joint commentary draws on evidence from 25 remote visits to adult prisons in early 2021 and 10 progress monitoring visits undertaken by Ofsted between May and July this year. The findings highlight the significant impact the pandemic has had on the quality of prison education, but acknowledges that the quality of the provision was already poor and had seen little improvement in recent years.

The findings from these visits "paint a stark picture" of remote education provided in prisons throughout the pandemic. In most cases, this was limited to providing prisoners with in-cell work packs, with little face-to-face teaching or feedback, which proved a frustrating and demotivating experience for many prisoners. Packs were often not tailored to specific education needs of prisoners, many of whom have difficulty reading and need closer support in their learning.

Prisoners are typically some of the most educationally disadvantaged in society, with a significant proportion having special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and low levels of literacy. One prisoner with dyslexia said he had been told he could not learn English or maths until face-to-face

teaching resumed. On this issue, the commentary adds:

Given the large number of prisoners with suspected learning difficulties/disabilities, and prisoner reading levels similar to that of primary-age children, it is highly likely that remote education is not suitable for prisoners in the same way as for pupils with SEND.

Ofsted and HMIP also found that vocational education has been greatly affected, with prison workshops and other places for work and training forced to close. This left learners on vocational courses unable to complete practical elements of the curriculum. And while there is some evidence that the number of prisoners learning English and maths increased during the pandemic, this was mainly due to a lack of preferable alternatives.

Work experience opportunities have also been lost. Some prisons were not able to maintain links with employers and some businesses, that would usually employ prisoners, are facing increased financial insecurity. Moreover, disruptions to information, advice and guidance (IAG) services in prisons have exacerbated these issues. This has resulted in significant backlogs of prisoner inductions, which has meant that prison leaders do not know the educational starting points for many prisoners.

Recommendations

The commentary includes a number of recommendations, including:

- Prison leaders and education providers must make sure assessments are used to identify gaps in learning and to support learners back into the classroom as quickly as possible.
- Prison leaders and education providers must make sure that there are as many vocational training opportunities and places as is practical as possible, while maintaining any social distancing guidelines.
- Prison leaders must work with IAG providers to clear induction backlogs as a priority. All prisoners, including those on shorter sentences, should receive a timely and effective induction to education, skills and work when they are placed in prison.

Launching the prison review

In the autumn term 2021, Ofsted and HMI Prisons will be launching a review of reading in prisons. The commentary notes that “Sadly, prison education is in a very poor state. It is time to give it the attention it deserves” and as a result, “we are setting up a review into prison education over the next year. This will start with a focus on reading in prisons as we return to full inspection in September. We will look at how reading is taught in prisons, how it is assessed and what progress prisoners make.”