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Public services performance tracker 2026

Criminal justice system



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About *Public Services Performance Tracker*

The *Public Services Performance Tracker 2026* annual report, published in partnership with the Nuffield Foundation, provides the most comprehensive stocktake of the Labour government's progress on public services since the 2024 general election. Using hundreds of indicators, it analyses spending, demand, staffing and performance across nine key public services: general practice, hospitals, adult social care, children's social care, schools, police, criminal courts, prisons, and the probation service.

This year's edition looks at how the government is progressing on its own stated goals for services, how progress varies across the country, and provides recommendations for how the Burnham government could improve performance over the remainder of this parliament. It also provides in-depth analysis of the Starmer government's record on public service reform as well as the cross-cutting issues facing local government, the NHS and criminal justice services.

This report focuses on the criminal justice system, covering the police, criminal courts, and prison and probation. It will be followed by instalments covering the NHS and local government, alongside a cross-service analysis bringing together insights, themes and recommendations from across all services.

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Introduction

When the Starmer government took office in July 2024, it inherited a criminal justice system in England and Wales that was fundamentally unable to cope with the level of demand it faced. Nowhere was this more visible or more acute than in prisons, which were at the point of total shutdown due to a lack of spaces.

Within a week of the election, the new government was forced to announce emergency early releases to free up space. But the situation in prisons was by no means unique. The probation service and criminal courts were also failing to fulfil their basic functions, leading to inadequate supervision and risk assessment in the former and spiralling case backlogs and years-long delays in the latter. Policing was managing the best out of the criminal justice services – but while crime had been generally falling for years, fewer than half of people saying their local police were doing a good job and frequent claims of 'lawlessness'[1] still left little to celebrate in terms of performance.

The Starmer government launched major reform programmes across policing, criminal courts and sentencing to try to address these linked capacity crises and so improve performance. But the programmes had mixed results, and some of them might have been more effective if they had been launched sooner after the government took office. Reforms were often uncoordinated, with the new police performance framework likely to drive up demand on criminal courts just as court reforms tried to bring it down.

But there has been significant progress on critical issues, including prison capacity, the criminal legal workforce and police oversight. Moreover, the Starmer administration deserves credit for tackling a set of thorny and often neglected problems. Addressing these is unlikely to win many votes; no prime minister wants to be known as the person who released criminals early. But these problems are corrosive to a functioning justice system and a fair society.

In some of his first moves as prime minister, Andy Burnham rowed back on some planned reforms, pausing early prison releases and casting doubt on whether he would push ahead with planned changes to jury trials. Ultimately, he continued with sentencing changes, with some additional exceptions. But restoring the criminal justice system to order is likely to require further politically difficult decisions, whether that is restructuring police forces, spending more on legal aid or investing in community provision for offenders. Burnham's broad agenda for more devolution in public services may help reduce demand and improve outcomes for the criminal justice system in the long term.[2] But it will not let him avoid further political pain in the coming months and years.

This chapter looks at the police, criminal courts, and prisons and probation. It draws on analysis of publicly available data, 21 semi-structured interviews with policy experts and staff working in these services and visits to two prisons, one crown court and one probation office, speaking to frontline staff and people interacting with the services.

Key findings

Across the criminal justice system

- **Successes and challenges in one part of the criminal justice system continue to shape challenges elsewhere.** Demand on criminal courts rises and falls in response to police charges, delays in the courts put serious pressure on prisons, and poor rehabilitative support and risk management within prisons and probation spill over into the community, often cycling back round as demand on the police.

- **Staff shortages are an ongoing issue that require continuous recruitment and investment in training new staff – putting a significant burden on existing staff.** Where sustained efforts have been made to increase particular workforces – police officers and PCSOs in neighbourhood roles, criminal lawyers – these seem to be effective. But maintaining staff numbers is difficult and requires steady effort and investment, as shown by the drop in prison officer numbers since March 2024. Without this, stop-start recruitment waves put serious pressure on staff and harms performance.

- **Reform programmes have not been joined up and risk working against each other.** There is still not enough effort being made to connect reform programmes and priorities across services. The police reform programme, for example, runs counter to efforts to devolve more power and make services more preventative and integrated – goals supported by both Starmer and Burnham. There is little evidence that the Criminal Justice Board is providing strategic oversight and connection across criminal justice.

Policing and crime

- Starmer's government made **good progress** on increasing police officers and community support officers in **neighbourhood roles**, surpassing their first year target with 3,800 more against a first year target of 3,000

- **Knife crime and neighbourhood crime have both fallen**, with offences using a knife down 10% since the general election

- Action plans on knife crime and violence against women and girls set out **bold preventative agendas** solidly backed by evidence, but will rely on **substantial, ongoing investment** to succeed

- The new police performance framework has more teeth, but is **likely to draw focus away from local policing priorities and oversight** in favour of Home Office priorities – working against Andy Burnham's devolution ambitions

- **Little progress** has been made so far on **restructuring local police forces** or creating a **National Police Service**

Criminal courts

- Capacity in the crown court has increased significantly, but **not enough to keep up with demand** – meaning the backlog continues to grow and delays keep getting worse
- In **magistrates' courts**, the backlog is growing **even more rapidly** and more serious cases are taking much longer to deal with. Courts are still closing **fewer, less complex cases** than before the pandemic, and an ongoing shortage of magistrates is limiting capacity
- The Starmer government made **little progress on reducing demand on the criminal courts** or improving efficiency
- Growing numbers of criminal lawyers, across the courts service, Crown Prosecution Service and private practice, should boost capacity and efficiency. But progress expanding the workforce may stall as criminal **legal aid fees have hardly increased in real terms since their unsustainable 2021 level**

Prisons and probation

- The Starmer government's good progress stabilising the prison population **may have been undone by Andy Burnham's government**
- Early signs of **reductions in violence, self-harm and protest in prisons** are **unlikely to be sustained** if capacity remains extremely tight
- Ongoing **staff shortages in the probation service** have left it struggling to manage caseloads, contributing to **extremely high rates of recall** and potentially putting the public at risk
- **Rehabilitation remains extremely poor**, with very limited purposeful activity and time out of their cells for prisoners and **little access to support** and crucial services for those on probation
- High **rates of recall a**nd problems managing high-need offenders in the community will continue to put **serious pressure on prison capacity**

Recommendations

Across the criminal justice system:

- Focus on the r**ecruitment and retention of key staff groups**, including: probation practitioners, criminal lawyers, magistrates and district judges in magistrates' courts, prison officers and support staff, including in administration and analytics

- Invest in **long-term prevention**, including broad family support that targets multiple areas of need (domestic abuse, knife crime, anti-social behaviour).

- As part of the drive to devolve more power to local areas, support established strategic authorities to take a **more holistic approach to crime and justice spending**, coordinating funding and interventions around substance misuse, domestic abuse, housing and so on. This should include **considering devolved delivery and oversight models for probation**.

- Provide more **joined-up strategic leadership across the criminal justice system** at a national level to ensure reform programmes work together and understand how demand and performance operates across the system.

Policing and crime

- Implement the **police performance framework flexibly**, allowing mayors, police and crime commissioners and policing authorities (once established) to set their own priority metrics and provide meaningful strategic direction for forces.

- Commit to **aligning police force boundaries to strategic authorities** on a one-to-one basis, even where this means splitting up existing forces.

- Ensure mayors, police and crime commissioners and policing authorities (once established) **keep the power to sack the chief constable** of their force.

- Maintain the **focus on neighbourhood policing and targeting knife crime** hotspots.

Criminal courts

- **Scrap plans to introduce judge-only trials for fraud trials**, and to increase magistrates' sentencing powers and restrict appeals from magistrates' courts.

- Reclassify minor 'either-way' offences as **summary only**, in line with Sir Brian Leveson's recommendation. Allow a maximum sentence of a year in custody for these offences.

- **Maintain the right to elect for trial in the crown court** for more serious either-way offences. If the government wants to abolish this right for some cases, it should only do so for offences where the **maximum sentence is two years or less**, as Leveson recommended.

- If the government wants to grow, or even maintain, the criminal legal workforce, it must **further increase legal aid fees** to a sustainable level and then commit to a means of **adjusting fees in response to inflation** and demand, such as a pay review body.

- Develop a realistic plan to recruit enough people to deal with the **increased workload in magistrates' courts**. This is likely to require a combination of district judges and magistrates.

Prisons and probation

- Avoid imposing **unnecessarily restrictive and punitive licence conditions** on people on probation, to **encourage trusted relationships** with probation supervisors and reduce administrative recalls.

- **Increase the number of probation practitioners** at a steady pace, avoiding large staff influxes (and likely exits) as far as possible.

- Provide probation delivery units with **more flexibility to hire or commission specialist services**, such as housing and mental health advisers, to provide timely access to specialist support. This could be done using some of the budget currently allocated to increase probation capacity and improve performance.

- **Reintroduce home detention** as a first-line means of managing the prison population, should it become necessary.

- Develop a **sentencing model that is transparent and understandable** for the public and victims, with an explicit custodial period. For prison sentences, this should **set out time in prison and time supervised in the community**. Avoid the use of licence periods with no supervision.

- Emphasise **purposeful activity in prisons**, to try to drive down violence, self-harm and drug use.

Policing and crime

Unlike many of the services we look at in *Public Services Performance Tracker*, policing was generally improving when the Starmer government took office in July 2024 – albeit from a low base. Officer numbers had increased sharply under the police uplift programme, launched by the Johnson government. Charges and other positive resolutions to crimes were rising. Most types of crime were falling or flat. But there were still some major challenges.

Certain serious violent offences had risen sharply from around 2014, including knife-enabled crime, with attempted murder and serious assaults recorded by the police both around 50% higher in 2023/24 than in 2009/10,[*,1] when Labour were last in office.

Alongside an increase in domestic abuse and sexual offences reported to the police, this has contributed to police demand becoming increasingly complex.[2] The police inspectorate has also identified serious failings in crime investigation and in responding to the public,[3] which may be contributing to widespread perceptions that crime is rising.[4]

Public trust and confidence in the police have fallen substantially.[5] There have been repeated incidents of serious misconduct and grave failings on racism, sexism and other prejudices, including those revealed in Baroness Casey's review of the Metropolitan Police.[6] These cast a long shadow on public trust. Under half of the public said their local police force was doing a good or excellent job in 2023/24. At the same time, under half of the public said their local police force was doing a good or excellent job in 2023/24.[7]

Against this backdrop, the Starmer government set clear, well-chosen objectives and successfully galvanised action to follow through on them. The milestone of having 13,000 more police officers and police community support officers (PCSOs) in neighbourhood roles by the end of this parliament is not a good metric for the overall success of the safer streets mission, as it does not measure outcomes. But neighbourhood policing was a good choice to focus on and should drive some improvements in police performance. The ambition to halve both knife crime and violence against women and girls (VAWG) within 10 years similarly sets a clear direction on priorities, and real progress has already been made on the knife crime goal. Both of these objectives require involvement from many services, not just policing, and the strength of partnership working is likely to be key to their success.

* Police-recorded crime is affected by changes in reporting and police recording practices, particularly changes to crime recording practices and rules from 2014 and in 2019. However, the impact of these changes on very serious crimes, such as serious knife-enabled assaults, is relatively small, so they are still a useful measure of trends. See Davies T and Farrell G, 'Knife crime has increased in England and Wales over the last decade – here's how the next government can prevent it', *The Conversation, 19 June 2024*, retrieved 28 September 2026, https://theconversation.com/knife-crime-has-increased-in-england-and-wales-over-the-last-decade-heres-how-the-next-government-can-prevent-it-230905

The Starmer government published a clear and coherent proposal for police reform in its white paper in January 2026 and also revamped the police performance framework.[8] These changes have successfully provided a sense of direction and a positive vision for policing. However, they are potentially in conflict both with the Burnham government's emphasis on local leadership and devolution, and with some goals in other criminal justice services. For example, the emphasis in the new police performance framework on using charges, rather than out-of-court resolutions, for VAWG offences is likely to put more pressure on overstretched magistrates' courts.

The case for some of the proposed structural reforms – particularly regional police force mergers – is much weaker than others. But even so, the Burnham government should seek to retain and build on many aspects of these reforms, while aligning them with its broader priorities for public service and state reform. It must also address persistent failings in police conduct and investigations, if policing is to deliver a high-quality service to the public.

Many of the reforms in policing are at relatively early stages, making it challenging to assess progress in the past year. This chapter therefore takes a more qualitative approach to determine whether the changes proposed are likely to further the government's objectives, as well as to assess some of the downsides or trade-offs they may face.

CJS Table 1.1 **Progress by the Starmer government on its objectives for policing and crime**

Objective	Progress	Reason
Halve knife crime by 2034	**Good progress**	The Starmer government published an action plan on knife crime, which takes a preventative approach and is solidly based on the evidence on what works. Knife-enabled crime fell 10% from 2023/24 to 2025/26, including the most serious knife-enabled offences.
Halve violence against women and girls (VAWG)	**Unknown**	The government has published a VAWG strategy and action plan, but success will be highly reliant on meaningful investment in prevention. No data is available yet on trends for the past year.
Boost neighbourhood policing	**Good progress**	The Starmer government successfully drove up the number of police officers and community support officers in neighbourhood roles, substantially exceeding the year one target (3,800 against a target of 3,000). There are some signs this is having a positive effect on neighbourhood crime. But it will be hard to sustain within the existing funding envelope.
Restructure policing	**Little progress**	The white paper on police reform sets out a clear vision for policing based on an explicit theory of change. But there has been little progress on implementation and there may be conflicts with the new prime minister's devolution agenda.
Strengthen oversight of police performance	**Some progress**	Interviewees were strongly positive about the new process for police performance oversight, suggesting it is clear, more transparent and has 'more teeth' behind it. But it may encourage too much central control from the Home Office and work against a more devolved and preventative approach.
Improve the response to serious disorder	**Some progress**	The Starmer government substantially strengthened central co-ordination and intelligence-sharing across police forces in response to incidents of serious disorder. Once set up, the National Police Service should also improve the response to these incidents. The political response to disorder from Starmer as prime minister and Shabana Mahmood as home secretary has been too weak, and Burnham appears to be taking much the same approach.

Source: Institute for Government analysis of various sources.

The government is currently ahead of its target on neighbourhood policing

Starmer made neighbourhood policing the backbone of his safer streets mission, pledging 13,000 more police officers and PCSOs in neighbourhood roles by the end of this parliament – a 76% increase compared to March 2025.* Neighbourhood policing teams are the visible front line of policing, patrolling communities, holding police surgeries and engaging with residents, community groups and schools.

The number of police officers and PCSOs in neighbourhood roles is an 'input' measure, rather than an outcome, which made it a poor choice for monitoring whether the government was actually achieving its mission of making streets safer. But neighbourhood policing was a good area to focus on that should improve performance and, despite some risk of perverse incentives, officers in neighbourhood roles was the most reasonable target to track progress, given the limited outcome metrics available.

Visible policing is an important driver of public trust and confidence,[9,10] and neighbourhood teams provide crucial intelligence and community connections, which support everything from local investigations to counterterrorism. Neighbourhood policing also takes a proactive, preventative approach, aiming to improve community safety by tackling the underlying causes of crime.[11] Neighbourhoods was one of the areas of policing that saw the biggest cuts in officer numbers over the 2010s[12] – despite the police inspectorate warning back in 2014 that "forces' ability to prevent crime and reduce demand will be seriously undermined if their neighbourhood teams are materially eroded".[13]

> **The thing that drives confidence in policing is place-based problem solving... the police being seen to work most effectively with others in a place to focus on the problems that matter to that place.** – Interviewee

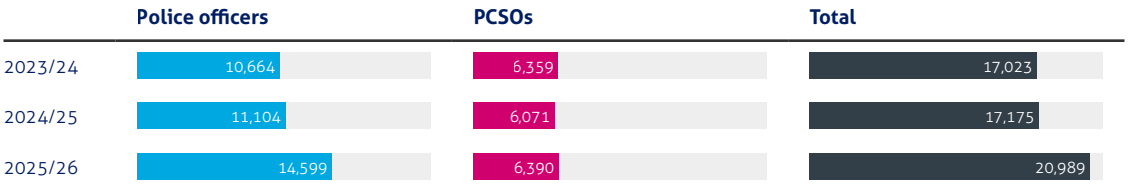
Moving away from a target based on headline officer numbers, created by the Johnson government as part of the police uplift programme, was also a positive step. The target created perverse incentives for forces to fill back-office roles with officers and to unnecessarily upgrade PCSOs to more expensive warranted officers.**

The Starmer government substantially exceeded its first-year target for neighbourhood officers, with an increase of more than 3,800 against a target of 3,000. Almost 3,500 of these are warranted officers, while just over 300 are PCSOs. Around 500 are still in training, but destined for neighbourhood roles. Even discounting those who are in training, however, this is almost a 20% increase in the number of officers in neighbourhood roles in a single year. The increase has principally been achieved by redeploying officers into neighbourhood roles, rather than additional recruitment; the total number of officers has actually fallen by around 600 since March 2025 (566 warranted officers and 55 PCSOs).

* Special constables – volunteers who act as police officers on a part-time basis – were also included in the original pledge but are not being tracked as progress against the 13,000 target.

** Warranted officers are full police officers who have completed the police training programme and have powers to arrest people.

Figure CJS 1.1 **Police officers and police community support officers in neighbourhood roles, 2023/2024–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Home Office, 'Provisional revision to neighbourhood policing data, at 31 March 2024' and Home Office, 'Police workforce, England and Wales: 31 March 2026'. Notes: Figures are full-time equivalent (FTE), as at 31 March in each year.

Redeployment in this way is not necessarily a bad thing, but there are limits to how far forces will be able to take this approach. By definition, it means removing officers from other teams and functions, which will become progressively harder to do as these teams shrink. Taken too far, it risks undermining other core functions of policing, such as responding to emergencies, safeguarding vulnerable people and intelligence gathering and analysis.

This is especially true given other government workforce commitments. These include creating specialist rape and sexual offence teams in every force, the deadline for which the Burnham government has just brought forward 18 months to December 2027.[14] This is also a positive step, but may make it harder for forces to find spare capacity that they can redeploy towards neighbourhood policing. So too will serious weaknesses in investigative teams and the significant threats to public order seen over recent summers, from both riots and organised crime.

> **We found a strong link between neighbourhood policing and overall organisational performance. Higher-performing forces used additional investment from the [Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee] to strengthen neighbourhood teams and protect them from routine abstractions. Their leaders took a long-term approach. They prioritised visibility, worked with communities and problem-solved, even if this created short-term pressures elsewhere… This helped reduce future demand.**
> – HM Chief Inspector[15]

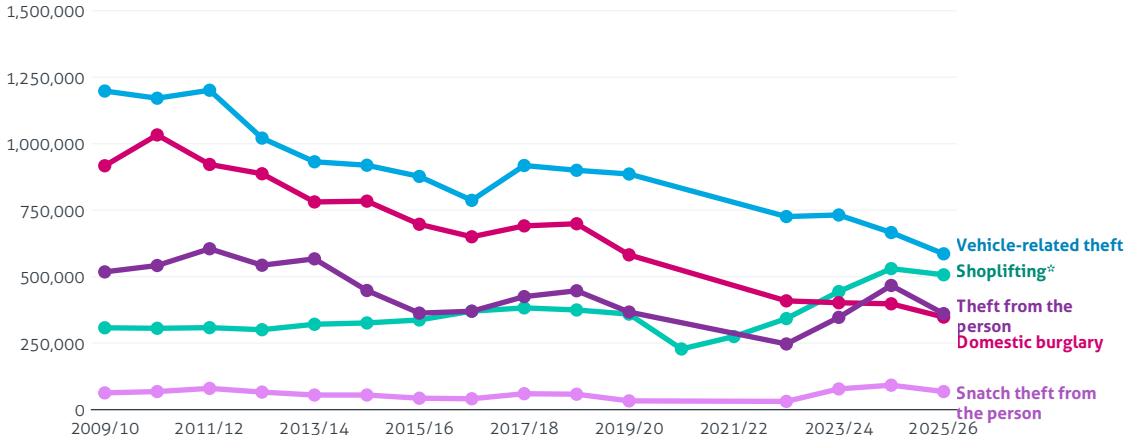
Officers are classified according to their primary job function, but the statistics do not differentiate between those who spend 100% of their time in a neighbourhood role versus those who spend just 55% in one. This may make the target vulnerable to 'gaming', via abstraction (when officers are temporarily assigned to other duties) or part-time redeployments. This is particularly a risk if police forces continue to rely on their existing pool of officers, and given major protests and public disorder incidents in recent years, which often require temporary redeployments of officers to handle.

One means of mitigating this would be to focus on PCSOs over warranted officers. PCSOs have more limited powers than warranted officers and so are harder to redeploy, and they are also cheaper to employ, so the same budget can hire more of them. But allowing headline officer numbers to fall substantially may be politically difficult. While good progress on the 13,000 officer goal has been made so far, therefore, it may still prove challenging to meet the final target while funding remains largely flat in real terms for the rest of the spending review period (up to 2028/29).

The focus on neighbourhoods may be contributing to falls in local crime

There are signs that the increase in neighbourhood officers and a focus on local crime may be having a positive effect on crime. While most crime types have been in sustained decline since the 1990s, low-level theft incidents rose sharply from 2022/23 to 2024/25, with recorded shoplifting up 55% and estimated theft from the person (such as pickpocketing or snatch theft) almost doubling in two years.[*,16] But, in the past year, these have dropped significantly. More serious forms of theft, including domestic burglary (13%) and theft of vehicles (31%), have also fallen sharply.

Figure CJS 1.2 **Estimated theft incidents, selected offence types, 2009/10–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026'. Notes: *Shoplifting offences are police-recorded crimes; other figures are estimated incidents from the Crime Survey for England and Wales. The crime survey includes offences against individuals or households who are resident in England and Wales; it excludes offences against businesses or children under 16. Crime survey data is not available for 2020/21 and 2021/22 as data collection was suspended due to the pandemic. Most vehicle-related theft is theft from, not of, a vehicle.

These drops are unlikely to be entirely attributable to policing. Changes in the international market for second-hand phones,[17,18] investments in security by supermarkets[19] and other shops, and even weather patterns[20] can cause substantial variation in crime levels. However, the fact that a wide range of local crime types seem to have been affected does suggest greater police presence may be playing a role.

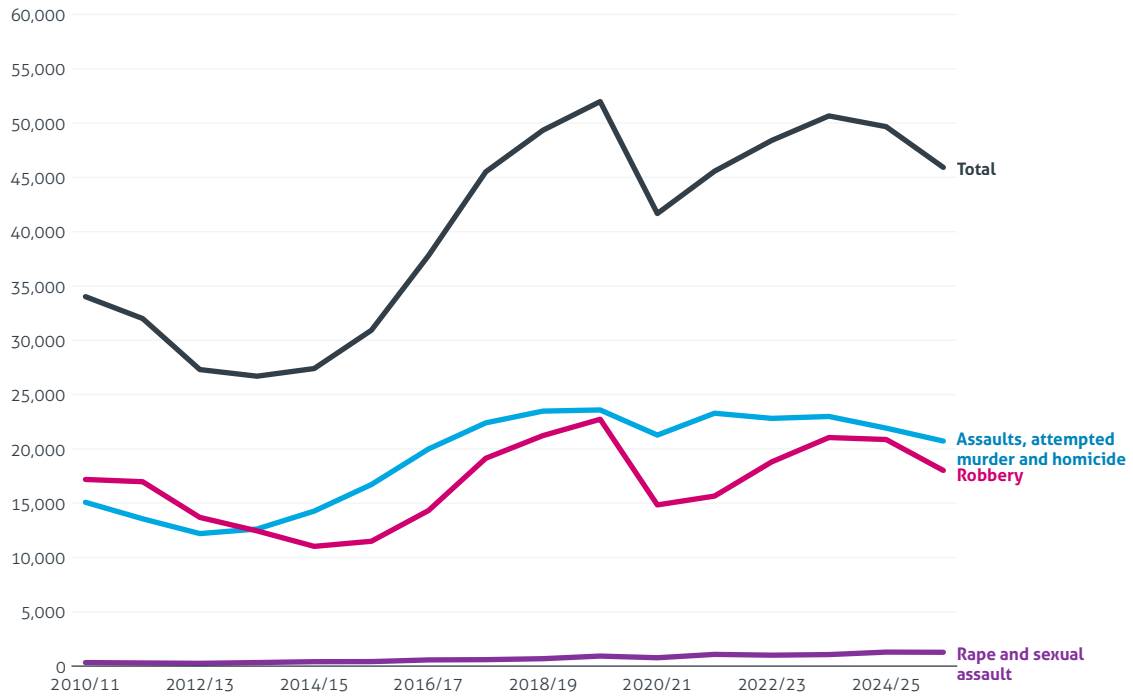
* Shoplifting figures are police-recorded crime while data on estimated theft from the person is from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

Targeted action on knife crime appears to be delivering results, with a notable drop in serious offences

Knife crime was another key focus of the Starmer government's safer streets mission, which aimed to halve knife crime within a decade. While this is a long-term goal, interviewees suggested that the knife crime target has successfully galvanised action and is shaping police activity.[21] Within a few months of taking office, in October 2024, the Starmer government set up the Knife-Enabled Robbery Taskforce, with a focus on targeting hyper-local 'hotspots' known to have high levels of knife-enabled robbery. Policing has since expanded on this approach, using 'problem-solving policing' to target tightly defined areas and the specific types and drivers of knife crime in each.*

This appears to be having results, as there was a 10% drop in serious offences involving a knife from 2023/24 to 2025/26. This has been driven by large drops in knife-enabled robbery (down 14%) and serious violent assaults, including murder and manslaughter (together down 11%). By contrast, knife-enabled rape and sexual assault have risen noticeably in the past two years (up 17%), but this is from a very low base and changes in police reporting and recording are likely to have had a significant influence on the data; the proportion of all rape and sexual offences that are knife-enabled has remained steady.

Figure CJS 1.3 **Knife-enabled offences recorded by the police, total and selected offences, 2010/11–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2026' (appendix table B6a). Notes: Knife-enabled offences are offences committed using a knife or sharp object, such as murder, threats to kill, assault with injury, robbery and sexual assault. Knife possession offences, which are heavily influenced by police activity such as stop and search, are not included. Figures exclude Greater Manchester police due to data quality issues and are affected by changes to police recording practices from 2014, but are still broadly comparable over time.

* Problem-solving policing involves identifying a specific problem, analysing its root causes or the conditions that enable it, developing a tailored response to address it and then assessing the impact. See College of Policing, 'Problem-solving policing', first published 19 October 2022, retrieved 28 September 2026, www.college.police.uk/guidance/problem-solving-policing.

As with neighbourhood crime, we cannot conclusively attribute these improvements to policing activity. One interviewee highlighted that robbery offences, which have accounted for most of the fall in knife-enabled offences, are particularly sensitive to any changes in the international market for second-hand phones, which may not be easily visible from the data or police intelligence.[22] Nonetheless, the widespread decline across most types of knife-enabled crime is a good sign, and should allow time for longer-term preventative action on knife crime to have an effect. Knife-enabled robbery also fell further in the seven areas targeted by the Knife-Enabled Robbery Taskforce (falling 15% from June 2024 to October 2025)* than it did nationally (10%), which similarly suggests policing tactics are having a positive effect.

In April 2026, the Starmer government published its knife crime action plan.[23] This was after considerable delay – almost two years after entering government. This suggests that while the knife crime mission has successfully been prioritised within policing and the Home Office, it has been less effective at driving cross-departmental work.

The plan is generally strong, but it is not clear that the investment promised meets the scale of the challenge, particularly in relation to early intervention. The Starmer government pledged £130m in total for knife crime prevention programmes in 2026/27, including £66m for serious violence reduction work by Violence Reduction Units and the new multi-agency Young Futures Panels pilots, and £26m for targeted policing activity in knife-crime hotspots. This is roughly equal in real terms to the £100m committed to serious violence by the Johnson government in 2019/20 (nearly £130m in today's prices), although the funding streams are not directly comparable.[24,25]

Some other funding is not specific to knife crime, but linked to broader support for children and families. For example, the Better Futures Fund promises £500m over 10 years to support up to 200,000 children, young people and families, but this aims to improve school attainment and youth employment as well as reducing youth offending.[26] This integrated approach is welcome, given how interconnected many of these problems are, but it makes it hard to assess how funding for violence prevention compares to previous years.

The action plan is explicitly grounded in longer-term prevention as well as short-term disruption and enforcement by police, and makes good use of the evidence on what works to reduce knife crime. This includes early intervention, ranging from investing in youth work and including healthy relationships education in schools, to improving mental health support in schools and colleges, along with reforming children's social care and improving safeguarding through the Families First Partnership. The plan also includes diversion from formal criminal justice processes for children where appropriate, and 'whole family' approaches to children who are at risk of involvement in knife crime.[27] A longer-term funding settlement for youth justice services is also very positive, as knife crime prevention and early intervention work often runs on annual contracts, making it hard to retain staff and sustain high-quality services.[28]

* This compares knife-enabled robbery offences in the 12 months to June 2024 to those in the 12 months to October 2025.

Where the action plan is notably much weaker is on interventions for adults who are already involved in knife crime. The plan acknowledges that knife crime is largely driven by adults, with three-quarters of knife crime offenders thought to be aged 18 or over and almost 65% of victims of knife crime who needed hospital treatment aged 25 or over in 2024–25.[29] It also highlights the role of multiple disadvantage – the combination of multiple problems such as substance misuse, mental health problems and homelessness – in driving knife crime. But the section in the plan on breaking the cycle of knife crime focuses on reforms to youth justice and generic support for adults, such as offending behaviour programmes and incentivised substance-free living wings in prisons. These may be valuable, but they are likely to achieve relatively little in reducing knife crime among adults.

The critical test of the action plan will inevitably be whether it can be effectively implemented and build on the early successes in bringing down knife crime. Hotspot policing – targeted, visible patrolling of very small areas with high levels of crime[30] – does not have a sustained impact on crime once police presence reduces or stops,[31] although it may have a longer-term effect if it is combined with problem-solving policing.[32] Delivering effective prevention requires substantial and sustained investment, much of it outside of policing such as substance misuse services, victim support, housing and other services that support those facing multiple disadvantage. With intense demand on public finances, adequately resourcing this will pose a major challenge for the Burnham government at the next spending review.

> **The plan's focus on early support and protecting children who are vulnerable to exploitation and serious violence is particularly encouraging. The real test, however, will be delivery. Short term funding and time limited pilots cannot undo years of instability in young people's lives. Prevention must be backed by sustained, long term investment if it is to make a lasting difference.**
> – Ben Kinsella Trust[33]

It is not yet clear what progress has been made on halving violence against women and girls

Tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) is both slower and harder to track. These offences commonly happen in private, domestic settings and are much less likely to be reported to the police, or to lead to prosecutions and convictions. They also involve a wider section of the population as both victims and perpetrators than knife crime, and in a broader range of places. These factors make it harder to achieve results through short-term disruption and enforcement activity. Preventative interventions, such as healthy relationships education in schools and family-based interventions to reduce domestic abuse,[34] can take many years to be effective.

Interviewees suggested that the goal of halving VAWG is focusing attention and activity, but that relatively little progress has been made so far because of the complexity of the problem and the time it takes to tackle it.[35]

The Starmer government published its VAWG strategy and action plan in December 2025,[36,37] which victim and survivor organisations generally welcomed. Positively, the strategy takes a preventative approach with a strong focus on perpetrators – aiming to prevent both first offending and reoffending.

Like the knife crime action plan, the VAWG action plan is closely linked to the evidence on what works.[38] Much of this activity is outside policing. For instance, one of the priorities is wrap-around family support, including expanded early help, multi-agency child protection teams and tools such as family group decision making that will be delivered through the Families First Partnership in children's social care. This broad approach is crucial to deliver the major transformation necessary to meet the ambition of halving VAWG.

Within policing, the National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection was set up in April 2025, as a joint initiative between the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing, and funded by the Home Office. Dedicated rape and sexual offences teams in every police force have also been promised – a commitment originally made under the Starmer government and since brought forward 18 months by Burnham.[39]

Assessing the scale of investment promised is hard, because there is no publicly available baseline to compare it to and, as with the knife crime action plan, the VAWG action plan includes funding for several programmes that are much broader than VAWG alone. The Families First Partnership, for example, commits £2.4bn over three years, which is a substantial increase in spending on preventative children's services. But while there is evidence that these kinds of interventions can reduce domestic abuse,[40] it is not the main purpose of the funding.

Last year's *Public Services Performance Tracker* examined recent trends in VAWG offences. There is currently no up-to-date data available on trends in domestic abuse or sexual offences, due to changes and delays in data processing for the Crime Survey for England and Wales.[41] This means it is not currently possible to see if any of these changes are affecting VAWG victimisation rates. However, as alluded to earlier, tackling VAWG is likely to be a much longer and slower process than reducing knife crime, so it would be surprising for any changes to be having an impact yet.

The Burnham government should build on the clear vision for police reform set out under Starmer

A number of major reforms to policing were announced under the Starmer government, including a major shake-up of police oversight with the abolition of police and crime commissioners.[42] The police reform white paper was subsequently published in January 2026 – several months later than the originally planned spring 2025.[43] It set out a clear, coherent vision for policing and a theory of change for how the proposals will address the problems the government has identified in policing, although some elements are in tension with devolving more power to local areas.

The biggest change proposed was major structural reform:

- creating a new National Police Service to hold various national responsibilities
- merging existing police forces into fewer, larger ones
- setting up 'local policing areas' to deliver local policing, likely to be similar to existing basic command units (BCUs).

So far, relatively little progress has been made on implementing these structural reforms or setting up the National Police Service. An independent review into police structures, set up in March 2026, has yet to report its findings.

There are strong arguments in favour of structural reform, particularly setting up a National Police Service. There is currently no co-ordinating body providing national strategic direction for policing. An empowered centre is also intended to facilitate stronger national leadership and co-ordination on professional standards, best practice and vetting, which would be valuable and should help improve public trust and confidence in the police.

Equally, bringing together national and regional responsibilities on counterterror policing and serious and organised crime into a single body should allow smoother co-ordination and intelligence sharing. These are currently split across individual police forces (such as the Metropolitan Police running counterterror policing), regional bodies such as the Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCUs) and the National Crime Agency. As these functions are merged nationally, it will be crucial to maintain connections to local and regional policing, so that intelligence can be gathered and shared and regional patterns or threats can be identified.[44]

> **The argument for establishing the [National Police Service] is strong. Policing lacks a single organisation that has the authority and responsibility to make and implement decisions across the system. As a result, decision-making can be too slow, forces take differing approaches without proper justification and capabilities are often dispersed across multiple organisations.**
> – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services[45]

Redrawing police force boundaries also makes sense. Interviewees widely considered the existing 43-force structure to be outdated[46] and boundaries frequently do not align with other services such as integrated care boards in the NHS, probation delivery units or mayoral strategic authorities. Police forces vary dramatically in size, in terms of geography, population and workforce, and many forces already collaborate on key areas such as custody suites, back-office functions and forensics. But substantially reducing the number of forces also holds some serious potential pitfalls.

There is no reason to keep this structure unless you believe you can't do change. – Interviewee

Would we design the 43-force structure now? No, of course not. – Interviewee

The government should realign local forces with strategic authorities on a one-to-one basis

Figuring out the right locus for different policing activities is hard. Too large an area, and there is a risk of losing local connection and accountability, and the ability to target specific problems in different areas. Too small, and it becomes harder to develop specialist skills and functions, and people and intelligence can fall through the gaps and patterns can be missed.

Shortly after the police reform white paper was published, the home secretary set up an independent review of police structures, led by former Metropolitan Police Commissioner Lord Bernard Hogan-Howe. This is a sensible exercise when it comes to deciding which responsibilities will sit at the different tiers. But deciding the size and shape of forces is a more fundamental question that the prime minister and home secretary should not delegate to a review. Instead, they should commit to aligning police forces to strategic authorities on a one-to-one basis, as they are set up.

The government's recent cabinet statement, 'Rewiring the state', declared an intention of aligning police force boundaries with strategic authorities.[47] This is very welcome, as misaligned boundaries can cause major headaches for service delivery and worsen barriers to partnerships and place-based working. However, the statement left open the possibility of having multiple strategic authorities within a single force. The government should avoid this, and instead have one force for each authority.

A one-to-one model provides far clearer lines of accountability and governance structures. Inherent to devolving power is accepting that different areas will make different choices. For example, one mayor may favour a 'prosecution first' approach to crime, focused on driving up charges, while another may want to pursue a more diversionary, problem-solving approach. If both areas are served by a single force, these are likely to be very difficult for the chief constable to balance.

There are inevitably downsides to aligning police forces to individual strategic authorities. Some existing and proposed strategic authorities, such as Hull and East Yorkshire, or Cornwall, are smaller than the police forces currently serving them and alignment would mean shrinking or breaking up existing forces. But even so, this is likely to be preferable to the alternative. Merging Humberside and Lincolnshire police forces to cover both Hull and East Yorkshire and Greater Lincolnshire strategic authorities would risk one area or the other being neglected or the chief constable being pulled in different directions by different mayors.

Equally, mayors (and other elected leaders, in areas without a mayor) are likely to be held responsible by their electorate for police performance in their area. It is important for democratic legitimacy and accountability, therefore, that they have the right levers available to them to address it. This should include the power to sack chief constables.

This one-to-one alignment would mean keeping a much larger number of forces than the 10–15 widely expected after the police reform white paper, likely around 30–35.[48,49] But even 15 forces would mean moving to a much larger geographic footprint, which would risk disconnecting forces from local communities and, crucially, local priorities and accountability. While the white paper argues that local policing areas will provide this local connection, strategic direction, operational management and culture will still largely come from the force, which will also continue to provide many core policing functions such as public order and major crime investigations.

The main operational advantage of larger forces would be supporting greater specialism in serious offences, particularly homicide and rape and serious sexual offences. Because some small forces typically have relatively few of these offences reported, they do not have the opportunity or capacity to develop a mature specialism in responding to and investigating these crimes. These specialist teams are valuable. In 2019, the Metropolitan Police disbanded its central Sapphire team, dedicated to sexual and child abuse offences, in favour of generalist teams within each basic command unit. Performance suffered as a result: it diluted the specialist skillset in investigating rape and serious sexual offences, and the loss of the prestigious central team also encouraged experienced specialist detectives to leave the force or seek other roles.' It diluted the specialist skillset in investigating rape and serious sexual offences, and the loss of the prestigious central team also encouraged experienced specialist detectives to leave the force or seek other roles.[50]

But regional forces would not necessarily solve this problem. Nor are they the only option. Many forces already have specialist joint units working across force boundaries, on areas ranging from protective services and firearms (Thames Valley Police with Hampshire and the Isle of Wight Constabulary)[51] to custody, criminal justice and analytics (Norfolk and Suffolk constabularies)[52] and major crime investigations (Avon and Somerset Police with Wiltshire Police),[53] among others.

The advantage of joint units over larger forces is that individual units can be set up in line with local needs and priorities, and then scrutinised and held accountable for their performance by the relevant mayors or policing boards for their constituent forces – and ultimately, via local and mayoral elections, by the communities they serve. Because these joint units would likely be limited to a few specific areas of policing, such as homicide and serious sexual offences, they do not pose the same problems for local accountability as merging whole forces. Equally, where local leaders do not believe they are delivering effective results or value for money, they can challenge police chiefs on that and ask them to justify the joint approach, potentially recommending withdrawing from joint arrangements if they believe it is not working well.

The central justification in the police reform white paper for substantially reducing the number of forces is efficiency.[54] It argues that consolidating back-office functions, ranging from human resources (HR) and payroll to forensics and data analysis, will reduce duplication and save money, particularly for smaller forces.

> **Having 43 police force headquarters each providing their own support functions to local policing is ineffective and inefficient. We are wasting money by procuring technology and equipment 43 different ways.** – Police reform white paper[55]

But these potential benefits are quite uncertain, particularly in terms of cashable savings. These kinds of mergers do not always unlock the savings envisaged, and several forces already collaborate on support functions such as HR and finance systems, digital evidence software and other systems,[56] meaning additional gains may be small. Where there are opportunities for large savings, these seem more likely to be delivered nationally via the new National Police Service – such as by the centralised procurement of police vehicles and IT systems.

Equally, there can be significant downsides to moving support functions such as admin, procurement and analytics further from the front line. Common complaints about centralised procurement in prisons and centralised contact centres in criminal courts illustrate this clearly, such as the complex bureaucracy to acquire basic goods, and delays and frustrations contacting courts for simple admin tasks.[57,58]

There will always be trade-offs with any structural reform. But one-to-one alignment with strategic authorities offers the best option for providing direct democratic accountability for policing and the right balance of localism and efficiency. The three-tier structure proposed for policing aligns well with Burnham's broader vision for the state, with enhanced roles for local and strategic authorities and a slimmer, more focused national state. The home secretary should therefore continue to pursue the reforms outlined in the police reform white paper, but in a way that reflects the new overarching agenda on public service reform.

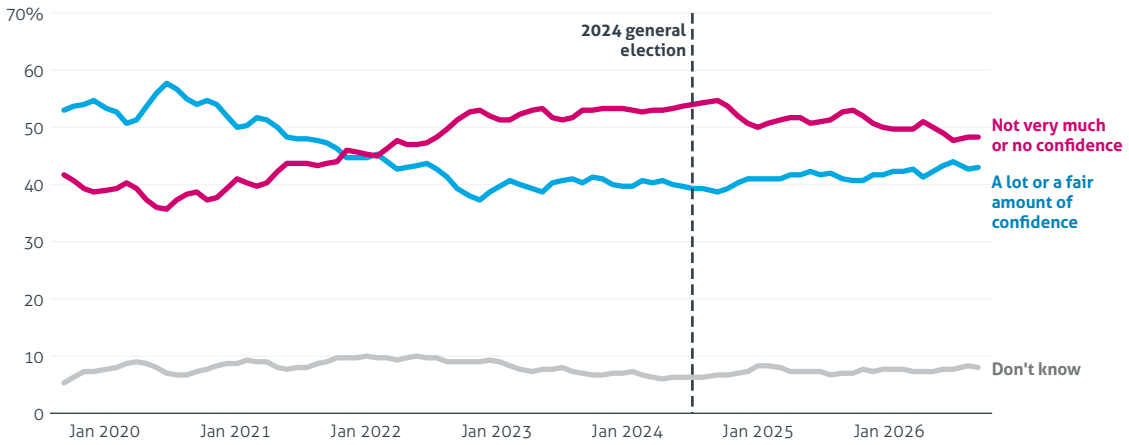
The revised police performance process has more teeth and provides stronger Home Office oversight

Policing has been struggling with poor performance for years, with the inspectorate criticising forces for "fail[ing] to get the basics right" as far back as 2022.[59] The quality of crime investigations, safeguarding vulnerable people and responding to the public (such as answering 999 calls and attending incidents) have been particular weaknesses,[60] and may have contributed to substantial declines in confidence in police performance.

While the most recent annual assessment highlights some improvements in how forces respond to the public and safeguard vulnerable people, there are still few forces that perform well in these areas. On investigation, performance is still poor, with none of the 13 forces inspected so far under the new inspection regime graded as 'outstanding' or 'good'.[61] It is especially concerning that there has been no improvement as officers hired through the police uplift programme have become more experienced. Public confidence has improved slightly, but remains low, with more

people saying that they have not very much or no confidence in their local police to tackle crime (48%) than that they have a fair amount or a lot of confidence (43%) in the three months to September 2026.

Figure CJS 1.4 **Public confidence in the police to tackle crime in their local area, September 2019 to September 2026**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of YouGov, 'How much confidence Brits have in police to deal with crime' (Generally speaking, how much confidence do you have in the police to deal with crime in your local area?), 2026.
Notes: Figures are rolling 12-week averages.

> **This is more than an issue of individual case quality. We found wider weaknesses in governance, understanding of demand and workforce planning, training and supervision. Forces often didn't have a clear enough understanding of crime-related demand or the skills and capacity they need to manage it. Investigators were overwhelmed by their workloads.** – HM Chief Inspector[62]

In this context, renewed attention on police performance management and oversight is very welcome. The Home Office has developed a new performance framework,[63] based on substantial consultation with stakeholders, that sets out the key metrics on which policing should be assessed. This forms the basis for the new performance process, which involves placing police forces in one of four levels.

These levels will be based on traditional inspections by the police inspectorate, combined with performance data collected by the Home Office. Levels will be assigned by the new Policing Performance Monitoring Group, chaired by the inspectorate and including the Home Office and other key policing bodies such as the National Police Chiefs' Council, the College of Policing, the Independent Office for Police Conduct and the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners.[64,65] However, the Chief Inspector will make the final decision on a force's level. This process is intended to be more transparent and collaborative, and allow for earlier identification of potential problems than the previous inspection regime.

Table CJS 1.2 **Police performance framework levels**

	Description	Response
Level one	Default level: no more than minor concerns	Forces can request support if they have their own concerns about performance
Level two	Some identified issues, typically low-level or where performance is improving but requires oversight	Forces can request enhanced support from the broader performance system to prevent deterioration
Level three	A single critical issue, systemic performance concerns or a failure show meaningful improvement	Forces are expected to develop improvement plans and suggestions for targeted support
Level four (special measures)	Very serious failings and a lack of confidence that the force is improving	Forces will be subject to special measures, possibly including direct intervention from the home secretary

Source: Institute for Government analysis of HMICFRS, 'Policing Performance System: how we monitor and improve police performance', 2026, and Institute for Government interviews, 2026.

The introduction of the level two 'early warning' tier and associated support offer is one of the most significant changes, and is intended to prevent escalation and stop declining performance. Forces will have access to additional support from partners across policing, such as the College of Policing, which is being strengthened to support this work.[66] The inspectorate is also gaining stronger powers, including the chief inspector being able to issue 'directions' to forces in response to serious causes of concern. Forces may also be subject to intervention by the home secretary, such as sending in 'turnaround teams' from other forces, if they persistently fail to improve or refuse to engage with support.

The home secretary will also regain the power to sack chief constables.[*,67] The overall thrust of the reforms shifts oversight and priority setting sharply towards the Home Office and away from local elected leaders and mayors.

Several interviewees agreed that the new process has "more teeth" and should make it possible to respond earlier and more effectively when forces are performing poorly.[68] But this is largely reliant on two assumptions:

1. There is enough capacity and capability in the wider policing system to provide effective support for forces that are struggling.

2. Oversight and 'grip' from the Home Office will be more effective at holding forces to account and improving performance than local scrutiny by police and crime commissioners and mayors.

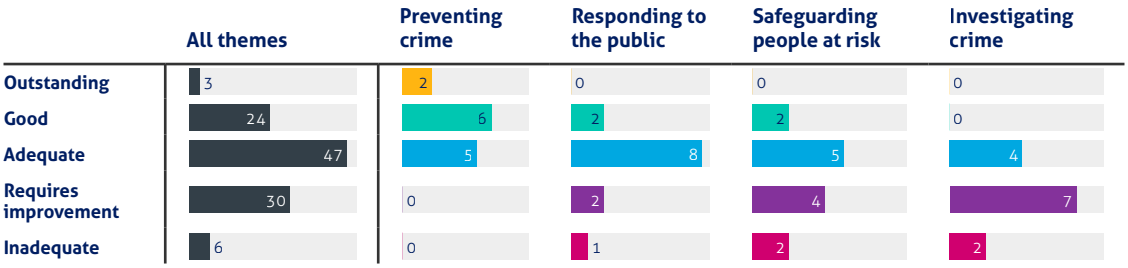
The first of these is subject to serious question. Out of 13 forces that have been inspected so far in the 2025–27 round, just two each have received a 'good' rating for safeguarding people at risk of harm and responding to the public, and none has received an 'outstanding' rating.[69] On investigating crime, where performance problems are most widespread, none has received a rating above 'adequate'. In the previous round, only two out of all 43 forces received a 'good' rating on investigation.

* This responsibility used to sit with the home secretary but passed to police and crime commissioners when they were introduced in 2012.

Moreover, the inspectorate and the police leadership commission have both highlighted poor leadership as one of the major barriers to improving police performance.[70,71]

Support will not only come from other forces: the College of Policing will also draw on the existing evidence base and national policing organisations such as the National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection, and the Centre for Police Productivity.[72] But even so, in this context of widespread performance problems, it may be hard to provide enough support, and enough high-quality leaders, to help all the forces that are in need of them and drive meaningful performance improvements.

Figure CJS 1.5 **Inspectorate ratings of police forces, all inspection themes and selected themes, 2025–27 cycle***



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HMICFRS, 'PEEL inspection grades in State of Policing 2025-26'. Notes: *Figures are for the 13 forces which had been inspected by March 2026 within the 2025–27 cycle. Each force is assessed across up to nine themes (some forces are not graded across all themes).

> **We have... identified systemic causes for concern about the consistency, capability and culture of leadership across the service. Put simply, leadership in policing is not consistently of a high enough standard to provide confidence and trust in the attainment of the service which the public deserves.**
> – Police Leadership Commission[73]

The view that more Home Office involvement in performance oversight will lead to better police performance is easier to justify. While inspectorate ratings carry significant weight, they are necessarily relatively infrequent and so cannot provide such timely monitoring as Home Office data can. The inspectorate does conduct inspections on an ongoing basis, which can allow major concerns to be flagged, but this is less intensive and granular than the new system.[74] The Home Office will also have a wider range of powers to compel forces to make changes.

But there are risks here too. Police and crime commissioners and mayors have a more rounded picture of crime prevention and response in their area than the Home Office can have. Shifting oversight to central government could encourage forces to focus much more on visible policing metrics and neglect broader partnership working, which is easier to spot at a local level. This may weaken prevention and problem-solving efforts, undermining performance over the longer term.

Close monitoring by the Home Office on central government priorities, and the use of these metrics to decide inspection tiers, are also likely to mean local priorities hold less sway with police forces. This risks accountability to mayors or local policing boards becoming mere lip service, while senior officers focus much more on Home Office-imposed metrics. Moving the power to sack chief constables from police and crime commissioners to the home secretary only amplifies this risk.

The new performance framework leaves relatively little space for local direction and priorities

The other key element of the new performance process is the performance framework itself. This sets out a large number of performance metrics, which will be monitored and inform the grading of forces. It includes 26 headline metrics that focus on key aspects of policing and the home secretary's priorities, as well as dozens of 'monitoring' metrics that will be used to help contextualise and understand the headline metrics and mitigate against perverse incentives.[75] There are currently two metrics with specific targets (on answering 999 calls and attending serious 'grade 1' incidents*), while the others set ambitions on the direction of travel.

Setting performance metrics for any service is difficult and complex, and this is especially true for a service with as wide a remit as policing. The metrics in the framework are generally well chosen and provide helpful information on police performance. The choice of targets is particularly positive. Targets are most effective at driving performance where they establish minimum standards, there are not too many of them and they are less vulnerable to gaming.[76] Response times are harder to game and it is reasonable to expect a consistent minimum standard across the country, making them good options for targets.

However, there may be too many headline performance metrics. Metrics need to capture the breadth of policing work, but there is a limit to how much police forces can focus on at any one time. If forces can choose to focus on some specific metrics over others, and have that reflected in their assessment by the inspectorate, the number of metrics should not be a problem. The process should be flexible enough that a force can say, for example, that they have chosen to focus on driving up charge volumes rather than charging offences more quickly, or that they are prioritising VAWG over knife crime based on their local priorities, and for their performance to be assessed accordingly. Without this flexibility, the sheer number of metrics in the national framework will make it extremely hard for mayors, police and crime commissioners and policing boards to meaningfully shape the priorities of their local force.

> **It's going to make it really difficult for local chiefs to balance their priorities for the force with [more than] 50 national metrics** – Interviewee

* These are the most urgent emergencies, such as where there is a danger to life, use or immediate threat of the use of violence, a serious crime in progress, etc. See Lincolnshire Police, 'When to call the police' (no date), retrieved 5 October 2026, www.lincs.police.uk/police-forces/lincolnshire-police/areas/about-us/about-us/contact/when-to-call-the-police

Some of the metrics may also not be the right ones. Of particular note here is the focus on charges, rather than all positive outcomes such as out-of-court resolutions, for offences involving VAWG. For some of these offences, such as serious sexual offences or prolonged stalking, an out-of-court resolution would clearly be inappropriate. But there are some out-of-court programmes for domestic abuse, such as Project CARA, which have a strong evidence base and may be more effective than charging at reducing VAWG.[77] Targeting charges is also likely to put additional pressure on magistrates' courts, which are already struggling to cope with demand, risking worse delays in resolving offences.

The metrics are also tightly focused on policing work, rather than engagement and collaborative working with partners. Especially in conjunction with the number of metrics being tracked and a greater role for the Home Office in overseeing forces, rather than local leaders, this may encourage a more insular and narrow approach to policing that hampers long-term preventative work.

In future, the framework will also incorporate the new National Strategic Policing Priorities, which will be issued by the home secretary.[78] These will replace the current Strategic Policing Requirement in setting out national threats and required national policing capabilities. They will also be broader, establishing key strategic priorities – such as tackling VAWG and knife crime – that the government wants all forces to focus on. Unlike the existing Strategic Policing Requirement, which forces only need to have "due regard" to, they "must comply" with the National Strategic Policing Priorities.[79]

This is much stronger language and again shifts decisions on strategic direction for forces away from local areas and towards the Home Office. The National Strategic Policing Priorities explicitly aim to "unite policing around a single vision for improvement and reduce unacceptable variation in standards".[80] But if devolution in public services is to be meaningful, it must allow for variation in standards and different visions for improvement and what good looks like.

In the face of prolonged performance problems in policing and a commonly expressed view that police and crime commissioners have not been effective at holding forces to account,[81,82] it makes sense that the government wants a firmer central grip on police performance and priorities. But this must be carefully balanced with the Burnham government's commitment to empowering local areas and "devolution by default".

Given the state of policing currently and the nascent – at best – state of many strategic authorities, it may make sense to take a more centralised approach to police performance and priorities in the short to medium term. But even so, the government must resist the urge to monitor or prioritise too many things at a national level, particularly within the National Strategic Policing Priorities. Prioritising some things necessarily means deprioritising others, and forces must have enough capacity in reserve to respond to locally set goals as well.

Better co-ordination seems to have improved the response to widespread violent disorder

Improving the police response to serious disorder was not an explicit goal when the Starmer government was elected, but it very quickly became one in response to racially aggravated riots in July and August 2024.[83] Two interviewees highlighted maintaining public order as one of the central challenges for policing over the past two years, in contrast to years before 2024.[84] The expectation among many policing stakeholders is that managing public order is likely to be an ongoing challenge for policing, including disruptive protests as well as violent disorder. Highly disruptive, threatening incidents with masked protesters in Dover and Portsmouth in September 2026 have once again brought this to the fore.

During the crisis of 2024, there was significant criticism that the police response was inadequate and forces were too slow to grasp the scale of the challenge. A major problem was how widespread the unrest was. One of the key policing tools to manage public disorder is mutual aid, which allows forces to share specialist officers, particularly officers with public order public safety (POPS) training: riot police.

Regional POPS mobilisation plans allow neighbouring forces to share the burden of responding to disorder. But when many forces are dealing with unrest at the same time, this system becomes hard to sustain. Ultimately, a national mobilisation of POPS officers was needed to restore order in August 2024.[85] The police inspectorate judged that this plan should have been activated earlier, which would have restored order more quickly.[86]

> **The police service must be able to anticipate serious violence and disorder. And it needs to enhance its plans at force, regional and national levels, so it can mobilise resources to multiple seats of disorder quickly and efficiently.**
> – His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services[87]

The inspectorate found that failures in intelligence sharing and analysis meant that the police underestimated the likelihood of disorder in 2024, given previous episodes of unrest over 2023 and 2024 and evidence of escalating tensions, such as at the 'Uniting the Kingdom' rally.[88] It was also critical of the lack of channels for gathering, analysing and sharing intelligence around disorder in real time, which made operational decision making much harder. While the National Police Coordination Centre has an intelligence analysis and sharing function, the inspectorate found it lacked the "capability and capacity" for this real-time sharing.[89]

In response to these problems identified in 2024, the Starmer government significantly strengthened national co-ordination and intelligence-sharing across forces around violent groups and public disorder.[90] One interviewee said this had created a "much more dynamic engine room" than had existed before, enabling much better central co-ordination and faster mobilisation. They suggested that this meant the response to disorder in 2025 – albeit on a smaller scale – was much faster and more effective than in 2024.[91]

The police reform white paper sets out further ambitions to build on this progress. It commits the government to appointing a senior national co-ordinator for public order policing, and strengthening the National Police Coordination Centre with an additional £2.75m of funding, particularly focused on data and intelligence.[92] These changes should allow for a better-organised and informed response to major public disorder. Once the National Police Service is up and running, it will absorb the National Police Coordination Centre, and should enable further resilience and flexibility in responding to major disorder incidents.

But the centre will still be largely reliant on local forces assessing and sharing intelligence about potential disorder effectively. As the recent failure of Kent police to identify intelligence about planned far-right protests shows, this is not always reliable.[93] A key focus throughout the police reform programme should be ensuring there are effective communication channels for intelligence all the way from front-line neighbourhood teams in local policing areas to forces and the National Police Service.

Even with better intelligence sharing, there will still be an onus on ministers, particularly the prime minister and home secretary, to take a visible public stand to combat violent public disorder. To date, Burnham and Mahmood (and their immediate predecessors) have failed to do this in an effective or timely manner.

Conclusion

As with other criminal justice services, policing continues to face serious and enduring performance problems. The past two years have not seen consistent improvements, with poor crime investigation and safeguarding continuing to be major concerns. However, the Starmer government made good progress on its key objectives and was on track to meet its goals on neighbourhood policing and knife crime, although there is still a long way to go on both. It also produced a roadmap for reform and revamped the performance management process, with a clear theory of change for how these will drive further performance improvements. Crucially, there are early signs this progress may be increasing public confidence in policing.

The Starmer government set ambitious targets and picked good priorities to focus on. Meeting these would be a huge achievement – one for which the Burnham administration should continue to strive. On knife crime and violence against women and girls, this will require sustained investment in preventative measures, ranging from early years parenting support to effective rehabilitative programmes for perpetrators and dedicated support for victims and survivors.

The government should also ensure that local and strategic authorities have the freedom to bring together different pots of funding on violence prevention, drugs and alcohol, family support and more, to deliver the most effective interventions for their communities. This should be rooted in the support that individuals and families need, rather than siloed across different services. Success in halving knife crime and violence against women and girls will require a tremendous effort across a wide range of services and government departments, including particular investment in youth services, mental health and early family support.

On police reform, the government should press ahead with the thrust of the white paper published under Starmer. But it must ensure the reforms further its overarching agenda on public services and state reform by aligning police forces and strategic authorities on a one-to-one basis. Equally, it should apply the new performance management process flexibly, to allow space for communities to pursue their own priorities around public safety and crime. This should ensure the right balance between central oversight and local leadership.

Recommendations

- Implement the **police performance framework flexibly**, allowing mayors, police and crime commissioners and policing authorities (once established) to set their own priority metrics and provide meaningful strategic direction for forces.

- Commit to **aligning police force boundaries to strategic authorities** on a one-to-one basis, even where this means splitting up existing forces.

- Ensure mayors, police and crime commissioners and policing authorities (once established) **keep the power to sack the chief constable** of their force.

- Maintain the **focus on neighbourhood policing and targeting knife crime** hotspots.

Criminal courts

When Labour came into government in July 2024, case backlogs in the criminal courts had been rising almost constantly for years. The open caseload was up 32% in magistrates' courts and 107% in the crown court since June 2019.[1] The average crown court trial in 2024 started more than a year after first being sent to the crown court: 59 weeks. Half of defendants held on remand in prison waiting for their trial were waiting at least four months.[*]

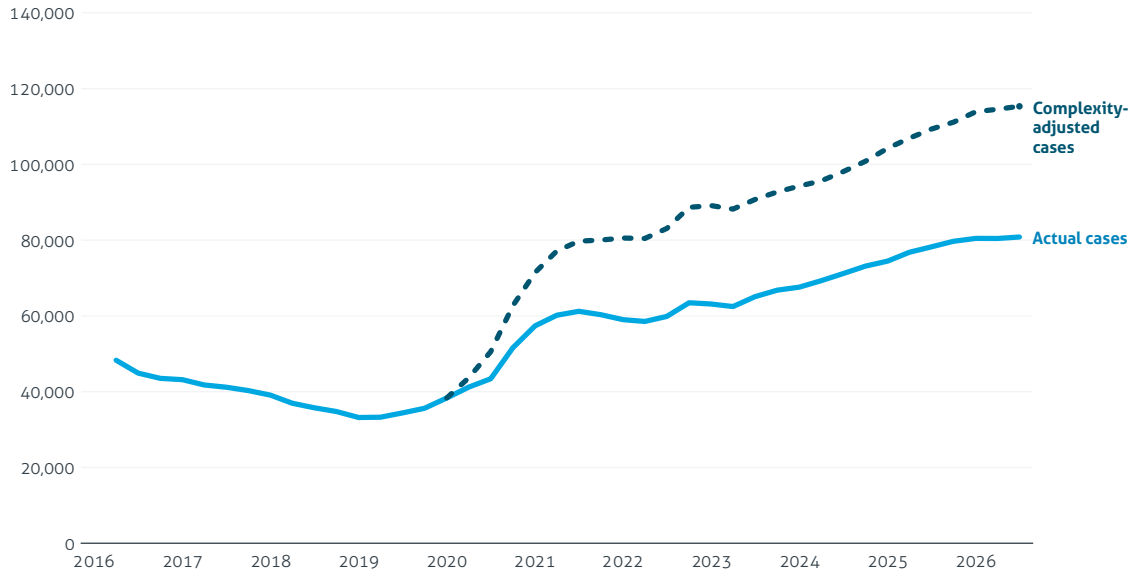
At the same time, courts were running less efficiently. More trials were being rescheduled at the last minute, courts were hearing cases fewer hours each day they were in session, and the number of trials being completed had fallen dramatically, particularly in magistrates' courts. Magistrates' courts were hearing fewer trials and increasingly delegating work up to the crown court.[2]

The Starmer government made addressing this backlog and the long delays for cases to be resolved its main priority in the criminal courts, but explicitly focused on the crown court much more than magistrates' courts. To some extent, this makes sense: the backlog in the crown court is much larger relative to the number of cases dealt with and will take much longer to resolve, and also involves the most serious offences.

But the volume of cases passing through magistrates' courts is more than 10 times larger – around 1.5m each year, compared to just 120,000 in the crown court.[3] Most of these are minor offences such as speeding or fare evasion, but they also include thousands of violent and sexual offences, including stalking, domestic abuse and other crimes the government is targeting as part of its goal to tackle violence against women and girls.

[*] Not all of these defendants will necessarily have been held in custody for this entire period, as this figure is the total time spent waiting for their trial, including any time spent on bail in the community.

Figure CJS 2.1 **Outstanding cases in the crown court, actual and complexity adjusted, Q1 2016 to Q2 2026**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly: April to June 2026'. Notes: Complexity-adjusted backlog is based on IfG modelling and accounts for the greater share of trial cases in the backlog. See the Methodology, found on the landing page for this report, for details.

There are three main levers the government is using to try to address the backlog:

- increasing capacity in the criminal courts
- reducing demand
- improving efficiency.

Tackling all of these at once – rather than, say, waiting to see if you can increase efficiency before you commit to increasing funding – is a positive move, even if we query the likely impact of some proposals. It maximises the potential impact and means that even as some measures have stalled (like the Courts and Tribunals Bill), others seem to be having an effect. Critically, efforts to increase the legal workforce seem to be bearing fruit, and faster than might have been expected. There are also early signs that efficiency may be improving in the crown court, and that the backlog may have stabilised.

But this progress remains fragile and has not yet started to bring down the backlog. Since June 2024, the number of open cases in the crown court has risen 14% – rising to 18% once adjusted for case complexity. In magistrates' courts, it has climbed 29%, and 43% for more serious 'either-way' and indictable cases.[4] There has been very little progress on structural reforms or attempts to reduce demand coming into the criminal courts, even though the Starmer government argued that this was essential to get to grips with the backlog.

Bringing down the backlog relies on continued investment, particularly in the workforce. The new prime minister and justice secretary should double-down on the Starmer government's early successes in increasing capacity and boosting efficiency. But they must also make up for the failure to reduce demand by revisiting some of the neglected proposals from Sir Brian Leveson's independent review of the criminal courts. All of these will be necessary if performance in the criminal courts is to improve.

Table CJS 2.1 **Progress by the Starmer government on its objectives for criminal courts**

Objective	Progress	Reason
Cut the crown court backlog	**No progress**	The backlog has started to stabilise in the crown court, but failure to act more quickly has meant this took longer than it would have done otherwise. Court capacity has increased, but relatively slowly.
Cut magistrates' courts backlog	**Deteriorated**	The backlog continues to grow rapidly in magistrates' courts, particularly for serious cases. Capacity remains below pre-pandemic levels and recruitment plans are probably not realistic, while planned structural reforms would increase demand sharply.
Reduce demand on the courts	**No progress**	Measures that Sir Brian Leveson proposed in his independent review to reduce the number of cases entering the courts, through increased police diversion, were not adopted. Plans to reduce demand by restricting jury trials were always likely to be very difficult to deliver and have now been watered down. Even if passed, they would be unlikely to reduce demand as much as hoped and would cause performance in magistrates' courts to deteriorate further.
Improve court efficiency	**Some progress**	The average number of hours a case takes to hear in the crown court has fallen (5% from 2024 to 2025), particularly for the most serious 'indictable only' trials (9%). However, average hearing hours per day have also fallen and are now under three hours, meaning more time is wasted each day. The new approach to listing crown court cases may have a positive impact, but has taken more than two years to produce and start implementing.
Increase the number of criminal lawyers	**Some progress**	The number of publicly funded criminal lawyers is growing, particularly crown advocates in the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and criminal barristers. This is in response to increased investment and more work being available, but further investment is almost certainly necessary to maintain higher numbers, especially in legal aid firms and at the bar.

Source: Institute for Government analysis of various sources.

Increasing capacity

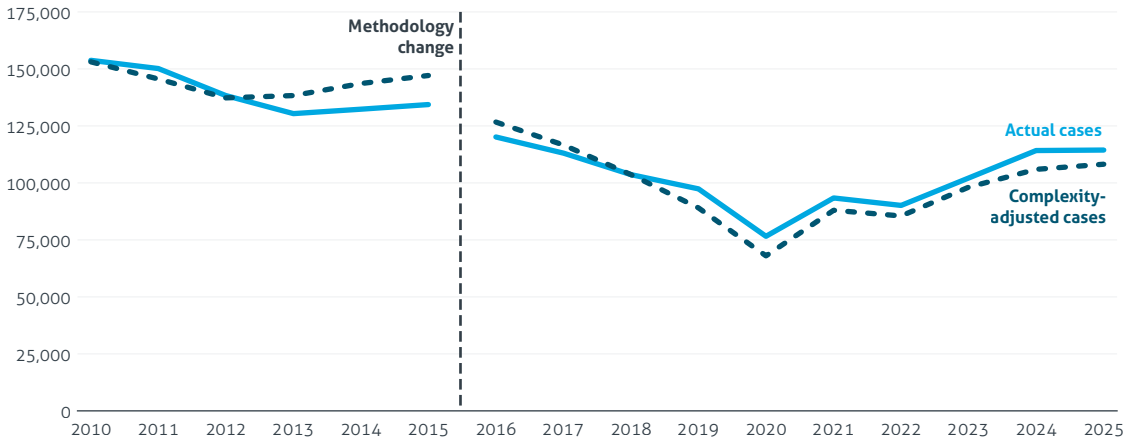
The total capacity of the criminal courts is principally a product of funding and the workforce, as well as physical courtrooms themselves. The government funds the courts via 'sitting days', which cover the days judges spend hearing cases, as well as through central funding for the HM Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS), which covers the administration and management of the courts. But this is only part of the picture. Hearing cases also relies on criminal lawyers to prosecute and defend, and it is this that has been the primary constraint on criminal court capacity in recent years.[5]

Capacity declined substantially in the criminal courts over the 2010s. Sharp cuts to legal aid funding under the coalition government caused the criminal legal workforce to fall,[6] and from the late 2010s a cap was imposed on the number of days the crown court could sit each year. Initially, demand was also declining due to falling crime and fewer charges. But when charges started to stabilise and then recover from 2018, it swiftly became evident that the courts could no longer keep up. When the pandemic hit, jury trials were paused and courts were slow to return to operating at full capacity, causing the backlog to soar.

The criminal courts are closing more cases, thanks to increased investment – but restricting crown court sitting days prevented bigger gains

The criminal courts are currently dealing with significantly more cases than in any other year since the start of the pandemic. The crown court closed 12% more cases in 2025 than in 2023 and 17% more than in 2019. Adjusting for case complexity, this increase was more than a fifth (22%) on 2019. However, cases entering the courts still outstripped cases closed by more than 5%, meaning open cases rose by 8%.[7]

Figure CJS 2.2 **Cases closed by the crown court, actual and complexity-adjusted, 2010-25**

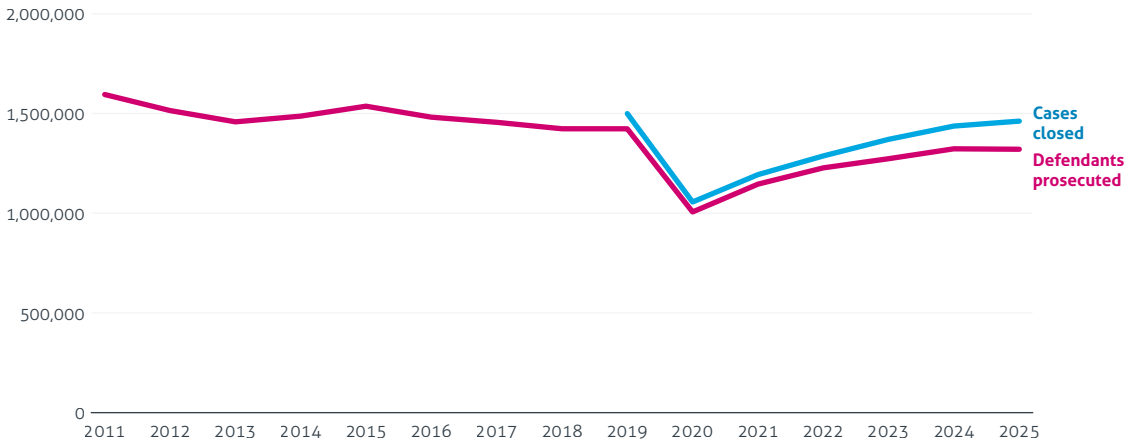


Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly' (Q1 2020 and Q1 2026). Notes: Cases are assigned a complexity weighting based on their type and offence group, calculated using average hearing hours. In 2024 the MoJ announced that data quality issues affected previously published data. Figures before 2016 have not been revised and should not be taken as exact values, but are likely to be within a few percent of the true values and the general trend is likely to be correct. Revised figures from 2016 also involved a methodology change to standardise figures across the MoJ and HMCTS

The picture is somewhat less positive in magistrates' courts, but there has still been an increase in activity. The number of cases closed rose 7% from 2023 to 2025, to return close to 2019 levels (down 3%). Nevertheless, as in the crown court, there were more new cases entering the courts than cases closed, so the backlog jumped 11% from December 2024 to December 2025. The number of open cases is now equal to a quarter of all cases received in 2025.[8]

There is no earlier data on case numbers, but we know that the number of defendants prosecuted remains significantly lower than in the 2010s, even though a growing proportion of cases – around 60% – are handled via the fast-track single justice procedure.[9] This procedure allows a single magistrate to deal with minor, non-imprisonable offences based on written submissions, rather than in a regular court hearing. They are dealt with very quickly, with many cases decided in less than a minute.[10]

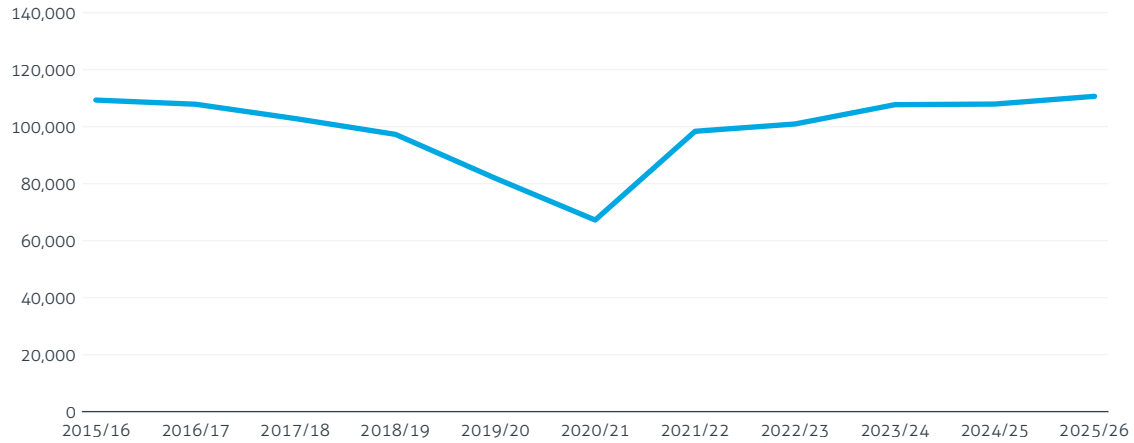
Figure CJS 2.3 **Cases closed and defendants prosecuted in magistrates' courts, 2011-25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly: January to March 2026'. Notes: Figures are for defendants proceeded against whose cases have closed, excluding those sent to the crown court.

This growth in activity has been driven by substantial funding increases. In the crown court, 30% more 'sitting days' were funded in 2025/26 than in 2019/20.[11] There is no specific data on magistrates' court funding before 2025/26, but overall funding for HMCTS and legal aid spending on the lower courts have both risen in recent years,[12,13] suggesting greater investment has played a role in increasing activity in magistrates' courts too.

Figure CJS 2.4 **Days sat in the crown court, 2015/16–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HMCTS, 'HMCTS management information - March 2026'. Notes: Figures are for the total number days where courts conducted hearings or decided cases 'on the papers', without a hearing.

However, more could have been achieved in the crown court if funding had not been restricted in the past two years. During the pandemic, the Conservative government set no limit on the number of days the crown court could sit from 2021/22 to 2023/24, in response to the growing backlog. But in 2024/25, it reintroduced the cap – setting it at 106,000, just below the 107,700 days that had been sat in 2023/24.[14]

When it took office, the Starmer government maintained the cap, although at a slightly higher level. It proceeded to top this up incrementally, with the cap ultimately reaching 111,250 sitting days for 2025/26.[15] This was just 3% higher than the number of days sat in 2023/24 – strikingly small given the severe problems facing the crown court. For 2026/27, the cap has been removed completely, and the former justice secretary, David Lammy, agreed high allocations for 2027/28 and 2028/29.[16]

Realistically, the crown court would probably have sat 2–3% more days over the past two years if sitting days had been uncapped in July 2024.[*,17] There were not enough lawyers, and potentially not enough judges, to accommodate more than this. That would not have been enough to prevent the backlog from continuing to rise. But it would have helped reduce the rate at which it grew. The cap itself, and the mid-year changes, also created inefficiency and wasted time and effort for lawyers and court admin staff. Because increases to sitting days were repeatedly announced mid-year, trials that had already been cancelled to stay below the cap had to be relisted, creating additional work for listing officers and pointless delays.[18]

* This is an Institute for Government estimate based on interviews, the number of days actually sat in 2023/24, 2024/25 and 2025/26, and the expected number of days that have been funded for 2027/28 (HM Courts and Tribunals Service, 'Crown court sitting days by financial year from April 2015 to March 2026', GOV.UK, 2026, retrieved 25 September 2026, www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/hmcts-management-information-march-2026; and House of Commons, Hansard, 'Written Statements', 25 February 2026, retrieved 25 September 2026, https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-02-25/hlws1365).

Investment in the workforce is also paying off, but does not go far enough and could have been done more quickly

As demand and funding for the criminal courts fell over the 2010s, so did numbers of criminal lawyers, judges and magistrates. The number of solicitors in criminal legal aid firms declined 31% from 2014/15 to 2023/24.[19] The number of publicly funded criminal barristers also fell over a similar period (down 4% from 2015/16 to 2023/24), as did the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) workforce.* When incoming cases started to rise again, and especially after the pandemic caused the case backlog to balloon rapidly, shortages of legal professionals and magistrates caused serious problems in ramping up capacity, as we outlined in last year's *Public Services Performance Tracker.*[20]

Shortages of legal professionals also create inefficiency. Trials are cancelled or rescheduled on the day because there is no lawyer available or the defence or prosecution have not had time to adequately prepare, wasting time for the court, lawyers and witnesses. A lack of legal advisers causes listing problems and inefficiencies in magistrates' courts.[21]

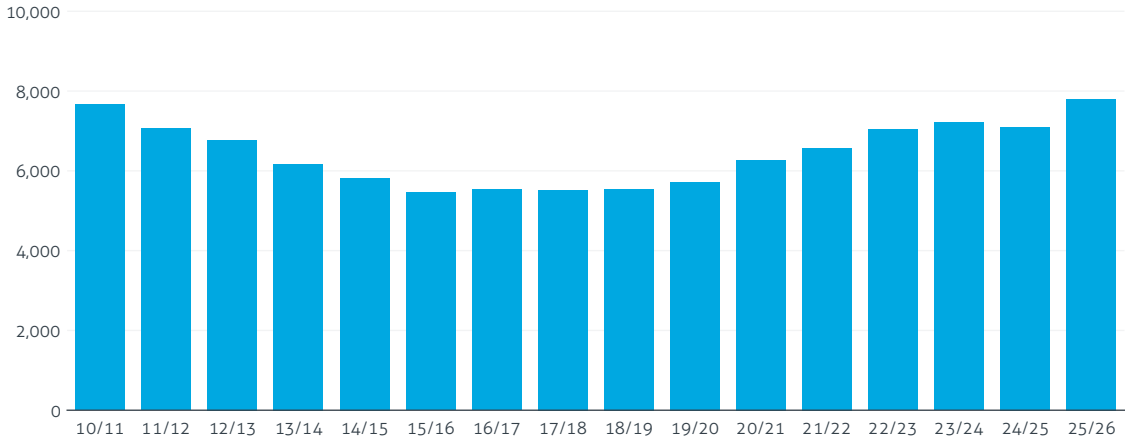
The Starmer government agreed with this diagnosis and announced several measures intended to boost the criminal legal workforce, as well as a major recruitment drive for magistrates.

The CPS, which prosecutes most criminal cases in England and Wales, received a substantial funding boost from the Starmer government in the 2025 spending review.[22] The Law Officers' Department, which funds the CPS, received average annual budget increases of 3.5% in real terms from 2023/24 to 2028/29, although this was heavily frontloaded, with big increases in 2025/26 and 2026/27 and then a freeze in cash terms (a real-terms cut). This allowed the CPS to raise overall staffing levels by 10% from 2024/25 to 2025/26, including increasing the number of crown advocates by more than 10% and paralegals by 20%.[23]

The CPS is also shifting focus to increase in-house advocacy roles, rather than using external advocates,[24] which should help ensure more predictable capacity and less last-minute disruption to cases. It has launched a new scheme, Go Prosecute, to bring experienced lawyers back into criminal practice.[25] This is particularly welcome given the concerns voiced by the CPS inspectorate around inexperienced lawyers affecting the quality of legal decision making.[26]

* Consistent data on legal professionals or prosecutors in the CPS is not available.

Figure CJS 2.5 **Crown Prosecution Service staff, 2010/11–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, 'Public Sector Employment' ('Table 9'), March 2026. Figures are full-time equivalents.

A shortage of legal advisers (qualified lawyers within HMCTS who advise magistrates on legal issues) has also held back capacity in magistrates' courts, with HMCTS citing it as "the main constraint on productivity" in magistrates' courts in 2024/25.[27] Again, there has been progress here, with a big recruitment push in 2024/25 allowing HMCTS to reach its target staffing level. The Starmer government also aimed to improve retention by increasing pay, to bring it closer to other government legal roles (including in the CPS), and by developing more options for career progression within HMCTS.[28,29] Nonetheless, interviewees indicated that not having enough legal advisers continues to be a problem.[30] It is not clear if this is because HMCTS has not managed to maintain target staffing levels, because those levels are set too low to meet demand, or because a large proportion of legal advisers are still in training, which limits the work they can undertake.

There are also early signs of improvement among defence lawyers. Because most criminal lawyers are either self-employed or work for private firms, the government cannot simply hire more. However, it has increased investment in the workforce, principally by raising criminal legal aid rates. This started under the Johnson government, in response to the independent review of criminal legal aid. The Truss and Sunak governments later increased criminal legal aid fees by 17% for barristers and 11% for solicitors, in cash terms.[31] These were the first cash increases to fees for many years, following cuts of up to 17.5% in cash terms in the 2010s.[32] However, high rates of inflation meant that, in real terms, fees fell 4.5% for solicitors and rose just 0.6% for barristers from 2021/22 to 2023/24.

The Starmer government promised cash fee increases of around 12% for solicitors and 11% for barristers.[33] Nonetheless, once adjusted for inflation, this will leave fees for both solicitors and barristers back around 2021/22 levels in 2026/27: down 1% for solicitors and up around 1% for barristers.[*,34] This is still well below 2010 levels; some estimates suggest real-terms fees will have fallen as much as 42% since 1997.[35] Only the significantly greater volume of work currently is making criminal law more

[*] It is not possible to work out an exact overall change in fees, due to how changes have been applied to different schemes, but this is a close approximation.

financially viable than in 2021/22. The Starmer government was also slow to make these changes: while a small increase of around 1% was announced in December 2024,[36] more substantial fee increases were only announced almost a year and a half after the general election, in December 2025.[37] This was despite the fact that it was clear in July 2024 that a shortage of criminal lawyers was contributing to the backlog.[38] As of October 2026, the fee increases for barristers announced in December 2025 have still not been implemented.

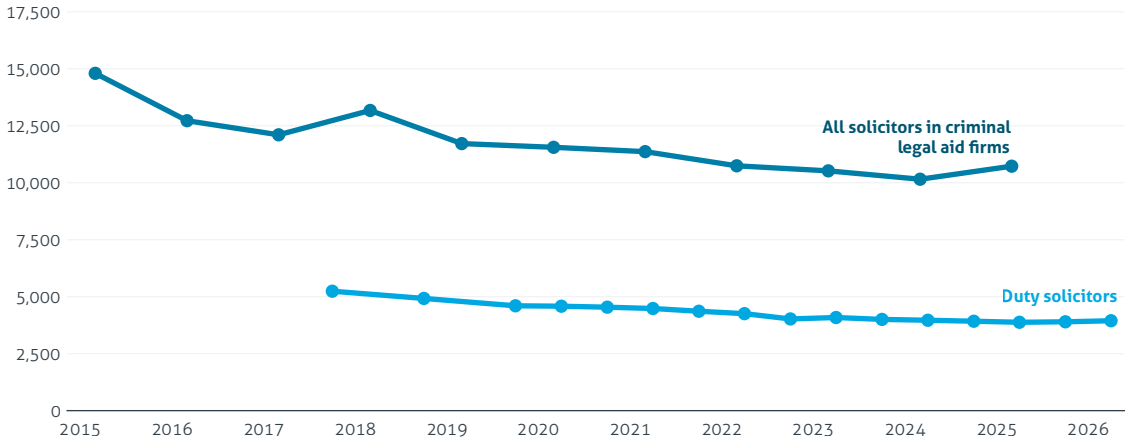
Under Starmer, the MoJ did take other steps to try to address the shortage of criminal lawyers, including committing itself to improve recruitment at the criminal bar by match-funding 100 new criminal pupillages.[39] Only around 150 newly called barristers move into full-practice criminal legal aid work each year, so this would be a substantial increase. But having been proposed by the Bar Council in September 2024,[40] the Starmer government again only accepted this recommendation in December 2025, and it is not due to be implemented until 2027/28.[41]

However, growing investment does seem to be having tangible results, and faster than might have been expected. Criminal barrister numbers were already rising, with the growing volume of work available and previous fee increases making the profession a more attractive proposition. Solicitors have now started to follow suit. The number of criminal legal aid barristers and solicitors in criminal legal aid firms* each jumped 6% from 2023/24 to 2024/25 – the first increase for solicitors since 2017/18.[42] This increase is likely due to the increases in fees and the volume of work that pre-dated the Starmer government, given it only took office in July 2024. Nonetheless, it suggests that higher potential income for criminal legal aid work has increased the number of criminal defence lawyers.

In the past year, there has also been a slight increase in duty solicitors (2% from April 2025 to April 2026), although it remains slightly below the level in April 2024.[43] Duty solicitors are specially qualified solicitors who provide publicly funded legal advice in police stations and courts to anyone arrested, or appearing in court and facing potential imprisonment, who does not have their own legal representation. This increase has been almost entirely driven by those under 35 – very welcome, given that more than 40% of duty solicitors are over 55.

* Data on solicitors specifically engaged in criminal legal aid work is not available, so this figure includes all solicitors in any firms receiving income from criminal legal aid. Around 55–60% of criminal legal aid spending on solicitors goes to firms 'mainly' doing criminal legal work, while almost all of the remainder goes to firms doing 'some' criminal legal work.

Figure CJS 2.6 **Criminal legal aid solicitors, by type, March 2015 to April 2026**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Legal aid statistics: January to March 2026'. Notes: Duty solicitors are specially qualified solicitors who provide publicly funded legal advice in police stations and courts to anyone arrested or appearing in court without their own legal representation. Figures include solicitors only as data is not available for other legal professionals on the duty rota. Not all solicitors in criminal legal aid firms will be practising criminal law. Data is available as snapshots every 12 months for all solicitors and every six months for duty solicitors. Figures are headcounts, not full-time equivalents.

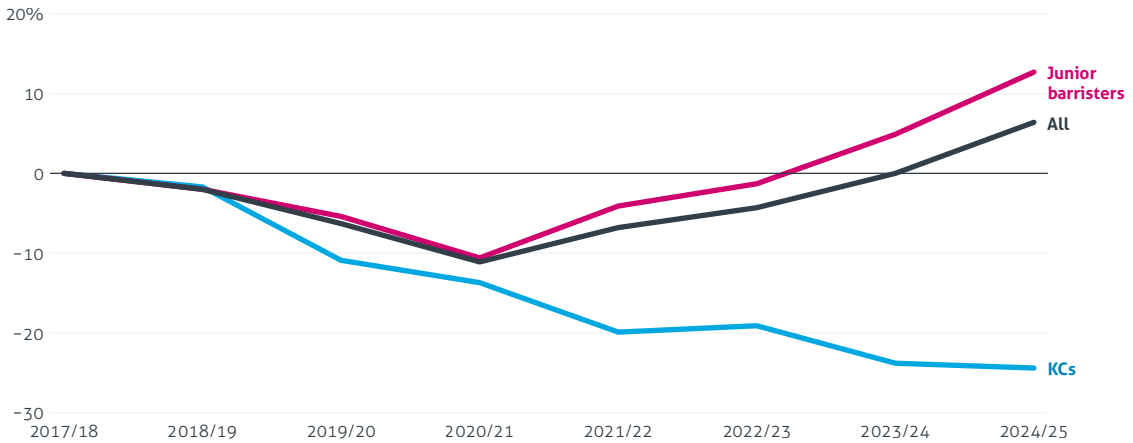
The problem is far from solved, however, and it is certainly not clear that these modest fee increases will be enough to restore the criminal legal workforce to sufficient levels to meet demand and improve efficiency in the courts. The Bar Council and Law Society have both expressed serious concerns about the continued viability of criminal legal aid work without a long-term commitment to, at the very least, maintain current fee levels in real terms.[44] In the meantime, many defendants continue to struggle to get legal advice and representation, posing a real problem for access to justice. The justice select committee found that the number of people now representing themselves, with no lawyer, creates an "unacceptably high risk of miscarriages of justice".[45] It also continues to cause productivity problems, with widespread reports that hearings where defendants represent themselves take much longer than those where they have lawyers.

The volume of work and swiftness of payment also affect the workforce. Data is not yet available on the number of criminal legal aid providers and the solicitors they employ for 2025/26, but provisional figures for criminal legal aid spending show a real-terms fall of 5% since 2024/25.[46] This is a worrying sign for whether workforce gains will be maintained. The plans in the Courts and Tribunals Bill to move a large proportion of cases from the crown court to magistrates' courts also risk undermining progress so far. Far fewer people qualify for legal aid in magistrates' courts, and fees are also lower, which would substantially reduce both the pool and profitability of legal aid work.

Criminal barristers are also increasingly inexperienced. A growing proportion of criminal legal aid is spent on barristers within three years of qualifying (8% in 2024/25 compared to 4% in 2021/22). Similarly, while overall numbers of criminal legal aid barristers have surpassed 2017/18 levels, the number of KCs* fell by a quarter over the same period, and shows no signs of recovering.[47]

* King's Counsel, or silks, are senior barristers recognised for their excellent advocacy skills. Solicitor advocates can also be appointed as King's Counsel, but are not included in this dataset.

Figure CJS 2.7 **Change in criminal legal aid barristers numbers since 2017/18, by seniority**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Legal aid statistics: January to March 2026'. Notes: 'Junior barristers includes all barristers who are not King's Counsel (KCs), regardless of years of experience. Figures include self-employed barristers who declare that most of their income is from criminal legal aid work. Figures are headcounts, not full-time equivalents.

Magistrate numbers are not growing fast enough, given the government's planned reforms

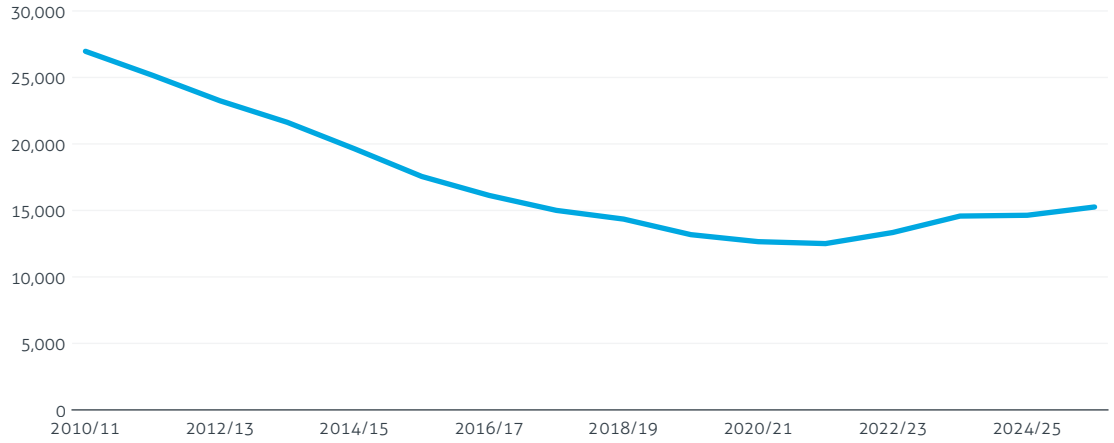
As with criminal lawyers, there is a shortage of magistrates,[48] with around 15% of magistrate benches in London observed by Transform Justice's court watchers sitting with two magistrates, rather than three.[49] This problem will be massively amplified if the government proceeds with its plans to move a large number of cases out of the crown court and into magistrates' courts, which the government estimates will increase demand on magistrates' courts by at least 7%.*

The Starmer government made some progress in recruiting more magistrates, with a 5% increase in headcount from 2023/24 to 2025/26, taking the total to just over 15,000 in March 2026.[50] Reforms to the recruitment process, including recruiting on an ongoing basis, do seem to be shortening the time it takes to appoint people and increasing the headcount. More magistrates were appointed from April to June 2026 than in any previous quarter.[51]

However, numbers are still a long way short of what is needed to meet the MoJ target of 21,000 magistrates by 2028/29. That would require an increase of more than 10% each year, more than double the 4% increase between March 2025 and March 2026. The justice committee argued that the government's goal was unrealistic, and that it should produce a plan to increase the use of salaried district judges to meet growing demand in magistrates' courts.[52]

* The government estimates an additional 8,500 sitting days will be required in magistrates' courts, around 7.5% of the 114,000 days funded for 2025/26. Institute for Government analysis of Ministry of Justice, 'Courts and Tribunals Bill (Structural criminal court reform) impact assessment', 2026, and Lammy D, Hansard, 'Written statement: Courts and Tribunals: Sitting Day Allocations', 25 February 2026, HCWS1362.

Figure CJS 2.8 **Magistrates, 2010/11–2024/25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Judicial diversity statistics', 2010/11–2025/26. Notes: Figures are headcounts, not full-time equivalents.

Diversity is also still a big problem in the recruitment of magistrates. Of serving magistrates, 81% are over the age of 50 and 57% are women, while only 14% are from a minority ethnic group.[53] Despite attempts to reform the recruitment process and attract a more diverse pool of applicants, new appointees continue to be non-representative in various ways, and certain applicants have much higher success rates than others. In 2025/26, 21% of white applicants were successfully appointed, compared to 10% each for Black and Asian applicants. 19% of all applicants were successful, but those in professional roles were more likely to be appointed (22%) while those who had not attended university (14%) or who were under the age of 40 (16%) were much less likely to be successful. And of newly appointed magistrates, 13% had attended a fee-paying school,[54] compared to just 7% of the UK population.[55]

Reducing demand

The Starmer government's attempts to reduce demand on the courts met with limited success

The centrepiece of the Starmer government's efforts to tackle the crown court backlog was the Courts and Tribunals Bill. In its original form, this proposed major structural reforms to the criminal courts, inspired by – although in many places different from – the recommendations set out by Sir Brian Leveson in part one of the independent review of the criminal courts.[56] The principal effect of these reforms would have been to roughly halve the number of cases heard by a jury, through several measures:

- removing the right of defendants charged with an 'either-way' offence* to choose to be tried in the crown court (known as the right to elect)
- increasing magistrates' sentencing powers from 12 months to up to 24 months (with the intention to initially set them at 18 months)
- setting up a new branch of the crown court, the Crown Court Bench Division, where a single judge will hear either-way cases expected to result in a sentence of up to three years

* An 'either-way' or 'triable-either-way' offence is one that can be heard in either a magistrates' court or the crown court, depending on the severity and complexity of the case and if the defendant chooses to exercise their right to be tried in the crown court.

- introducing the option for judge-alone trials for certain fraud and financial crime cases.

The proposals would also remove the automatic right of appeal to the crown court for cases that are heard in magistrates' courts.

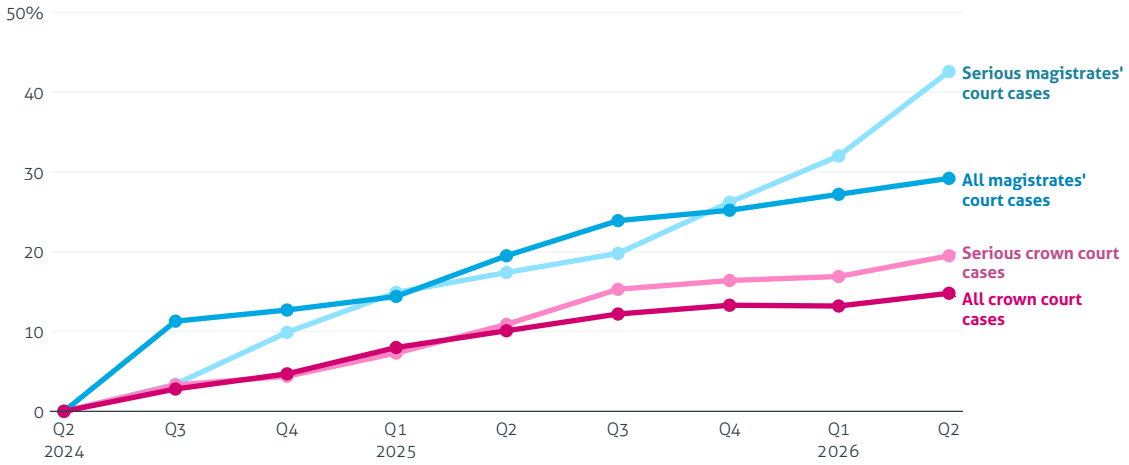
In October 2026, the justice secretary Alex Norris confirmed that the government would not proceed with introducing judge-alone trials, except in cases of complex fraud, money laundering and similar offences. However, it still plans to increase magistrates' sentencing powers and abolish the right to choose a jury trial.[57] These would still be radical reforms that would reduce jury trials by around a third.[58]

As set out in our previous reports on jury trials, these measures would likely reduce overall demand on the courts, although probably not as much as the government hopes.[59,60] What is more, while they would save time in the crown court, they would substantially increase demand on magistrates' courts, where the backlog is already growing faster than in the crown court. The crown court backlog has increased by 14% since the general election, while the magistrates' court open caseload has risen 29% – and 43% for the more serious and complex 'either-way' and 'indictable only' cases. Half of trials in magistrates' courts now take around six months or longer from charge to the case completing.[61]

The justification for maintaining judge-alone trials for fraud, false accounting, money laundering and related offences is relatively weak, as set out by Jonathan Fisher KC in his recent independent review of fraud.[62] Many cases across different offence types are serious and complex, and it is not clear why fraud should be treated differently by not being dealt with by a jury. The fundamental question in a fraud trial is whether someone has acted dishonestly, by the "standards of ordinary, decent people", which is exactly the value the jury is intended to provide.[63]

> **Public confidence matters. Trying fraud without a jury risks the perception of opacity or special treatment, particularly in high-profile economic cases of political interest. Jury trial keeps proceedings intelligible in open court to defendants, victims, the media and the public. Remove the jury, and that civic ownership of criminal justice is undermined. Also, it would feed the narrative that powerful defendants are judged behind closed professional doors.** – Jonathan Fisher KC[64]

Figure CJS 2.9 **Change in open cases in criminal courts, by court and case type, since Q2 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly: April to June 2026'. Serious crown court cases are indictable only cases. Serious magistrates' court cases are indictable only and triable-either-way cases.

The Courts and Tribunals Bill was not the only way the Starmer government tried to reduce demand on the courts. One early step it took was to increase magistrates' court sentencing powers from six months (for a single offence) to 12, in November 2024.[65] This does seem to have saved time in the crown court. The proportion of eligible cases that were sent to the crown court for sentencing, after the defendant had been convicted or pleaded guilty in the magistrates' court, fell from 18% in 2024 to 14% in 2025.[66] That is equivalent to around 6,200 hours saved in the crown court – 2% of the total time sat in 2025 – although this drop may have been affected by changes in other factors, such as average offence severity.

It is less clear, however, that raising sentencing powers further would have a substantial additional impact. Currently, only around a third of sentences of between six and 12 months are given out by magistrates' courts, and this has been largely consistent since magistrates' sentencing powers were changed in November 2024.[67] This suggests that magistrates are less confident in passing sentence for this cohort of defendants – and that is even more likely to be true for sentences up to 18 months or two years.

One alternative to raising magistrates' sentencing powers would be to reclassify some 'either-way' offences (which can be tried in magistrates' courts or the crown court) as 'summary only' (which can only be tried and sentenced in magistrates' courts). This was a recommendation put forward by Leveson in his review of the criminal courts, along with a list of proposed offences to be reclassified.[68] Reclassifying offences as summary only would limit the maximum sentence that could be imposed, but as Leveson suggested, this could be set at 12 months in prison for these offences, rather than the existing six-month maximum for most summary offences.

This would likely be much less controversial and pose a lower risk of injustice than completely abolishing defendants' right to elect for a crown court trial across a much broader range of offences, or further increasing magistrates' sentencing powers, while having a similar effect for the offences concerned. The right to choose a crown court trial could also be limited, rather than abolished completely. In more complex, serious

cases where the defendant potentially faces a lengthy prison sentence, a crown court trial offers a higher standard of justice than summary justice in a magistrates' court. If the government does proceed with restricting the right to elect, it should be limited to less serious either-way cases, where the defendant faces a maximum prison sentence of two years or less – in line with Leveson's recommendation.[69]

A further recommendation from Leveson that the Starmer government did not pursue was encouraging greater use of out-of-court resolutions – such as cautions, community resolutions or police fines – to keep cases out of magistrates' courts. In fact, the new police performance framework, published in early 2026,[70] pushes in the other direction on crimes associated with violence against women and girls. By focusing specifically on charges over out-of-court resolutions for these crime types, it risks driving up demand on magistrates' courts at the same time as the MoJ is trying to reduce it.

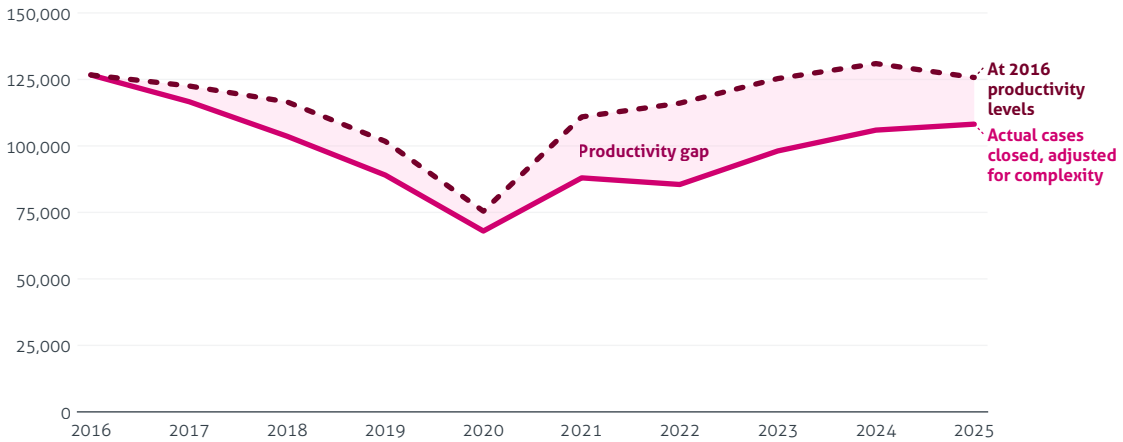
Improving efficiency

Early signs suggest some improvement in crown court efficiency – but hearing hours per day remain very low

In last year's *Public Services Performance Tracker*, we identified the shortage of legal professionals, poor court administration and crumbling physical and IT infrastructure as key drivers of poor court productivity.[71] Sir Brian Leveson largely agreed with this diagnosis in part two of his independent review of the criminal courts, which focused on court efficiency. He also highlighted the role of increasing case and trial complexity – for instance, with additional rules on the disclosure of unused evidence – and poor working relationships between different criminal justice agencies, particularly the CPS and the police.[72]

The crown court 'productivity gap' seems to have narrowed in the past year. This is the difference between the number of cases that would have been closed if the court had maintained 2016 efficiency levels, and the number of cases actually dealt with. The improvement in the last year has been driven by an increase in the number and complexity of cases being closed each day the crown court is sitting.

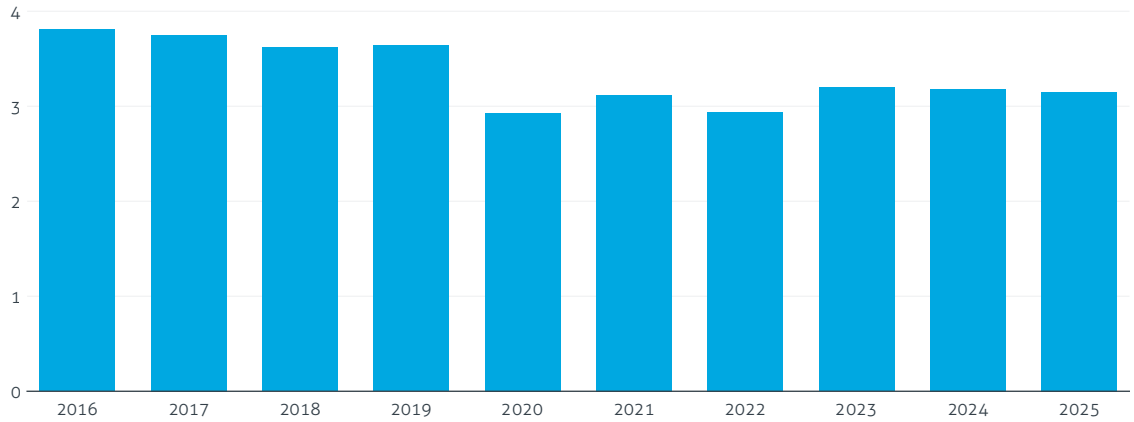
Figure CJS 2.10 **Complexity-adjusted cases closed in the crown court, actual and modelled, 2016–25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly: January to March 2026' and HMCTS, 'Crown Court Sitting days by financial year from April 2015 to March 2026'. Notes: Modelled figures ('At 2016 productivity levels') are based on maintaining the 2016 level of complexity-adjusted cases closed per sitting day and applying that to the actual number of sitting days in subsequent years. Complexity adjustment accounts for the type of case and offence group; see the Methodology, found on the landing page for this report, for details.

This is an encouraging sign, after several years of efficiency declining or stagnating. But there is an important caveat. The improvement has been driven by a fall in the average number of hours spent on each case, dropping 5% from 3.3 hours in 2024 to 3.1 hours in 2025 and 3.2 in the first six months of 2026.[73] The number of hours actually spent in hearings each day did not improve at all, and remained 17% below 2016 levels at 3.15 hours per day. In the first quarter of 2026, it fell even further, to just 2.9 hours per day.[74] So while courts are getting through more *cases* per day, they are hearing fewer *hours* per day.

Figure CJS 2.11 **Crown court hearing hours per sitting day, 2016–25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal courts statistics quarterly: January to March 2026' and HMCTS, 'Crown Court Sitting days by financial year from April 2015 to March 2025'. Total annual hearing hours is calculated by multiplying average hearing time in hours per case by the total number of valid cases disposed of. This is then divided by the number of days sat in the crown court that year. All hearing hours for a case are counted in the year the case closed.

The high rate of trials being rescheduled on the day is likely to be contributing to courts hearing fewer hours. So too are delays to prisoner transport, which interviewees consistently highlighted as a major source of delay and inefficiency in both magistrates' courts and the crown court.[75] Relatively few trials are rescheduled for this reason, but there is no reliable data on how many are delayed, sometimes for several hours. Poor court administration and crumbling infrastructure are also likely contributing to ongoing problems increasing hearing hours per day.

The fall in average hearing time is driven primarily by more serious 'indictable only' cases and cases where the defendant is held in custody (both down 9% from 2024 to 2025).[76] This may be because courts are prioritising these cases for trial: these cases are starting more quickly after they arrive at the crown court, particularly where the defendant pleads not guilty. The average indictable only case where the defendant was in custody started a little over a week sooner (5%) and took an hour less time to hear (10%) in 2025 than in 2024. Where the defendant pleaded not guilty, the trial started three and a half weeks (8%) sooner and took 1.3 hours less to hear.

Prioritising these cases means they do not take as much time in court. Cases that wait longer to start tend to take longer to hear, especially when the defendant is in custody, because there are more intermediate hearings such as bail applications. Increases in the legal workforce may also have contributed to this improvement by making it easier to find qualified lawyers to hear these more complex cases, reducing delays.

If this greater efficiency can be sustained, it would be hugely welcome. But it must be combined with renewed efforts to increase the number of hours heard per sitting day. This requires bringing down the number of trials rescheduled on the day of trial, ensuring prisoners are delivered to court on time and improving physical and IT infrastructure in courts.

There is much less detailed data available about efficiency in magistrates' courts, but they also seem to be suffering from serious productivity problems, as we explored in last year's *Performance Tracker.* Transform Justice's Courtwatch project, in which volunteers observe proceedings in London magistrates' courts, has highlighted major inefficiencies and unnecessary delays.[77] We also heard from interviewees that the centralised telephone system for the courts – intended to improve efficiency – is making it much harder to contact local courts, causing further problems with listing and flagging potential issues with upcoming hearings in a timely manner.[78]

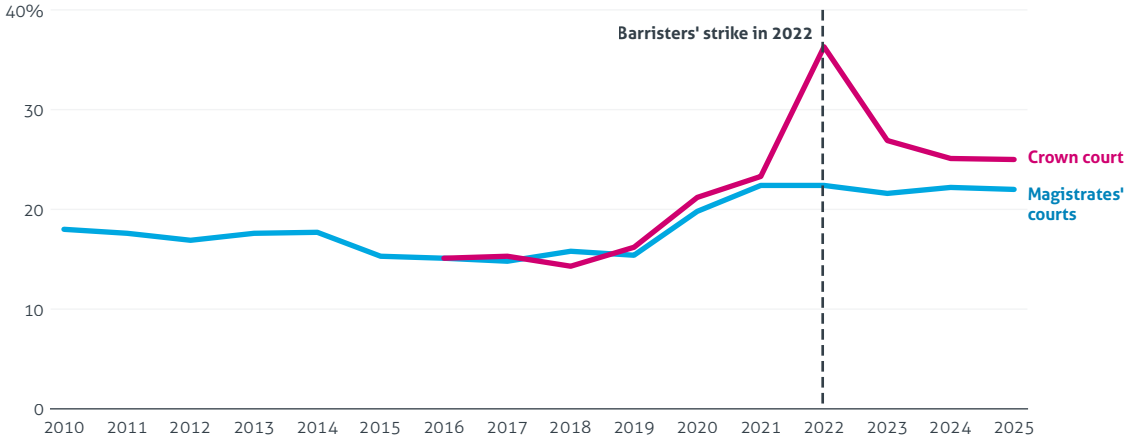
Too many trials are still being rescheduled at the last minute

Frequent, often last-minute trial cancellations and rescheduling are a major source of inefficiency in criminal courts, as well as having a serious negative impact on victims, witnesses and defendants. They waste lots of time for lawyers and judges in preparation, for witnesses who attend (including professional witnesses such as police officers) and for court listing officers and other case management staff who then have to find another slot for the trial – sometimes weeks or months away.[79]

This problem is widely recognised, but there has been no improvement in the past year. The number of trials rescheduled on the day remains substantially above pre-pandemic levels in both magistrates' courts (22% of scheduled trials*) and the crown court (25%).[80] Moreover, these high rates have become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: because so many trials are cancelled or rescheduled on the day, courts list more cases to hear, to try to avoid empty slots in their schedules. This then inevitably leads to more cases not being heard at the last minute, but these cases still take up time for participants and can cause misery and frustration for victims, witnesses and defendants. In 2025, 7.5% of all scheduled trials were rescheduled because of overlisting or another case overrunning – up from 6% in 2024 and 3.2% in 2016.[81]

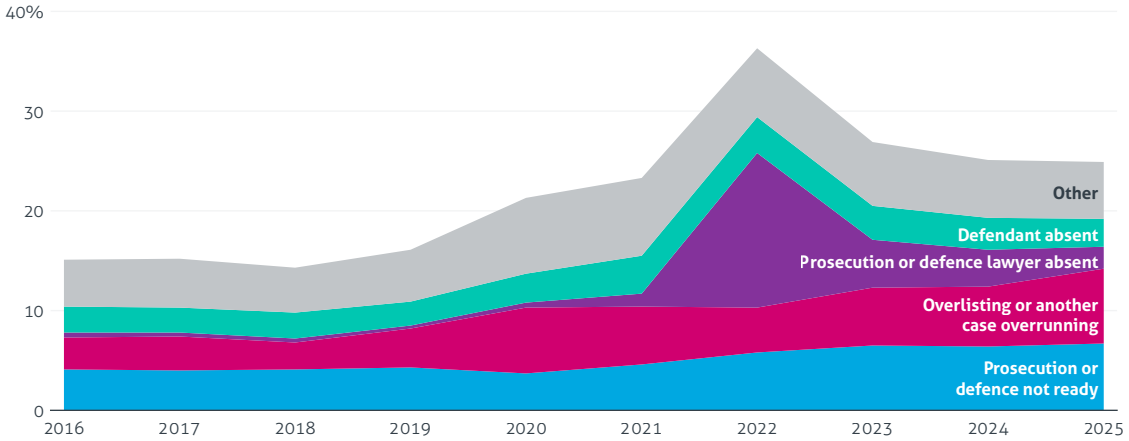
* Scheduled trials here refers to trials that reach the day of trial without being cancelled or re-listed; it does not include vacated trials which are cancelled or rescheduled before the trial date.

Figure CJS 2.12 **Trials rescheduled on the day, by court type, 2010–25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly: January to March 2026' (trial effectiveness tool). Notes: Crown court data is only available back to 2016 due to data quality issues.

Figure CJS 2.13 **Crown court trials rescheduled on the day, by reason for delay, 2016–25**

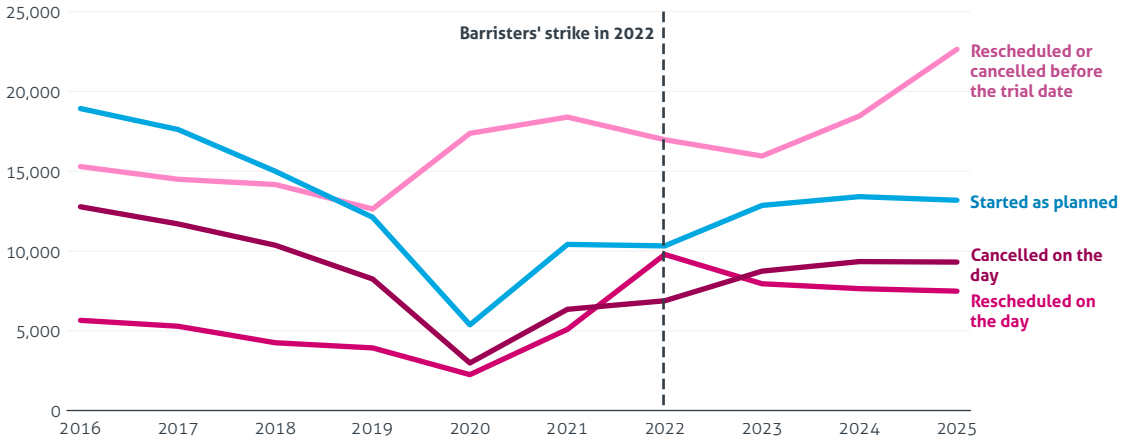


Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly: January to March 2026'. Figures are the proportion of all scheduled trials ('effective', 'ineffective' and 'cracked') that were rescheduled on the day the trial was due to start ('ineffective'). A single case may be ineffective more than once.

However, there has been a small improvement in the number of trials in the crown court rescheduled on the day specifically because the prosecution or defence lawyer was absent, likely reflecting the increase in the workforce discussed above. This dropped from 3.7% of scheduled trials in 2024 to 2.2% in 2025, although it remains much higher than the 0.3–0.5% that was typical before the pandemic.[82]

Trials are not only rescheduled on the day. The number of trials listed and then cancelled or rescheduled in advance of the trial has been rising sharply, especially in the crown court, and is at record highs. In 2016, there were six trials in the crown court that started as planned for every 10 that were rescheduled or cancelled.[83] In 2025, there were just three. Some of the rise in rescheduling and cancellations has been due to more cases being dropped and more guilty pleas being entered after a trial date has been set. But 15% of trials rescheduled or cancelled before the day of trial were due to a lack of enough court time – up from 10% in 2016.

Figure CJS 2.14 **Trials listed in the crown court, by outcome, 2016–25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Criminal court statistics quarterly: January to March 2026' (trial effectiveness tool). Trials that are rescheduled on the day are 'ineffective' trials; trials that are rescheduled before the trial date are 'vacated' trials. A single trial may be ineffective or vacated multiple times. Trials that are cancelled on the day are 'cracked' trials. A trial that started as planned ('effective' trials) may have been ineffective and/or vacated on an earlier date.

These changes are not as disruptive as trials rescheduled on the day. But they still put a substantial burden on the system, particularly in terms of additional work for case management staff in the courts.

There has been limited progress on efficiency initiatives

Part two of the independent review of the criminal courts, published in February 2026, included extensive recommendations about how to improve efficiency in the criminal courts.[84] The Criminal Courts Improvement Group, a cross-system forum run by the judiciary, has also focused extensively on driving efficiency, including through better case management, listing reforms and the use of AI.[85] But as yet, relatively few changes have been implemented.

The Starmer government piloted a case co-ordinator role in some areas, intended to support more efficient case management. The courts minister promised an evaluation of this in the autumn of 2025;[86] this has not been published, but in February 2026 the then justice secretary, David Lammy, committed to expanding these roles to all crown court centres.[87] There was no significant increase in the HMCTS workforce from 2023/24 to 2025/26, which remains more than a fifth smaller than in 2010/11 (although a similar size to 2015/16).[88] This suggests there has not yet been a substantial investment in administrative or case management capacity.

Other initiatives include setting up blitz courts in several areas, which aim to deal with similar cases in batches to increase efficiency. It is possible that these are contributing to the decrease in average hearing time per case. However, as blitz courts typically do not deal with the most serious cases, which have accounted for most of the fall, they are unlikely to be a major factor.

The lady chief justice has recently published a new direction on listing, which is intended both to help list cases in the criminal courts more efficiently, and to prioritise cases based on "the human impact of delay", including on any vulnerable witnesses

and defendants held in custody. This came into effect in October 2026. It sets out seven different tiers of priority for cases in the crown court, based on the vulnerability of any witnesses, victims or defendants, the potential impact of delay on evidence quality and other key factors.[89]

The practice direction also creates two kinds of trial listing: fixed date or flexible date. Fixed dates should be given where there is "a high level of confidence that a court and judge will be available to commence the trial on that date", while flexible dates are intended to be heard within a specified week. The priority tiers will be used to allocate trials either a fixed date or flexible date.* Three weeks before the trial, courts must hold a case progression meeting to review the case and consider if it needs to be relisted.

This approach is intended to reduce the number of rescheduled trials, particularly trials rescheduled on the day, and ensure that trials that are rescheduled generally do not involve vulnerable people. Whether it will work in practice is a different question. Advocates are likely to struggle to hold an entire week free waiting for a flexible listing to be confirmed, given how low legal aid fees still are for many cases. There is therefore a real risk that when the court comes to fix a date for the hearing, the advocate is no longer available and someone else will have to be found at short notice.[90]

Prison capacity may also make this approach to listing difficult to implement. The focus on human impact is likely to mean that serious cases where the defendant is on bail, especially rape and other serious sexual offences cases, are prioritised. But if this means less focus on hearing remand cases, especially less serious ones, it is likely to ramp up pressure on prison capacity once more. Given how tight prison capacity is expected to be over the next few years, this could fundamentally undermine the ambition behind the new practice direction.

Ultimately, the intention is that the practice direction will form the backbone of an AI-powered national listing tool that interfaces with Common Platform, the case management software in the criminal courts. But there is little information available about how this will work, and severe problems during the rollout of Common Platform mean that it is still a source of frustration and mistrust for many people working in and with the courts.[91] The framework is also complex, and it may prove more difficult, rather than less, to prioritise case listing with so many different tiers of priority.

Other factors continue to be a drag on court efficiency. There is a £1.3bn maintenance backlog in the courts,** meaning that leaks, broken fire alarms and tech failures continue to take courtrooms out of action or delay hearings.[92,93] In the meantime, capital spending by HMCTS has continued to be relatively low. The HMCTS capital budget in 2024/25 was 19% lower in real terms than in 2023/24, and was also significantly underspent – so actual capital spending dropped by almost 30%.[94] The Starmer government increased maintenance spending within HMCTS by around

* Tiers 1, 2 and 5–7 should all get a fixed trial date. These include cases involving a death, with a highly vulnerable victim, witness or defendant, or where delay is likely to be particularly detrimental to the evidence or proceedings, as well as any case allocated to a high court judge, the terrorism cases list or the economic crime list, or which is likely to take more than five days at trial.

** In 2025/26 prices (UK Parliament, 'Courts: repairs and maintenance', written questions and answers, 10 October 2025, https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-10-10/78877).

a third in real terms from 2024/25 to 2025/26, reaching £162m across capital and day-to-day maintenance spending.[95] Further large increases in the HMCTS capital budget are planned for 2026/27 (up 37% on 2025/26 in real terms) and 2028/29 (up 95% on 2025/26 in real terms). By 2028/29 it will reach around £410m in 2026/27 prices. However, even this is likely to make limited progress against such a large maintenance backlog.

Conclusions

On headline numbers, the Starmer government failed in its quest to lower court backlogs. Since the election, the crown court backlog has climbed almost 15% and the magistrates' court by over 30% – and both have seen even larger increases for more complex cases. Structural reforms to reduce demand were delayed for several months in 2026, likely in part due to the change of prime minister and period of instability that preceded this. Key efficiency metrics, such as the rate of trials rescheduled on the day, remain very poor and the number of hours in hearings per day in the crown court has sunk to an all-time low.

Pressure across the criminal justice system also continues to cause problems for courts. There is no joined-up strategic view across the system, which means that the impact of changes in one part of the system on the other organisations within it is not properly considered or understood. For example, poor case file quality can cause significant delays in bringing cases to court[96] or mean that cases are charged when they should not be, or vice versa. And yet case file quality is not one of the more than 70 metrics in the new police performance framework.

Instead, the framework largely focuses on the number of charges for key offences – discouraging the use of other positive outcomes such as cautions and so potentially increasing demand on already stretched magistrates' courts. Nor are potential restructures, in both courts and policing, likely to improve cross-agency working. These changes cause significant disruption and often mean services are focused inwards on their own reorganisation, rather than building relationships with partners. In this context, a coherent strategic approach to the criminal justice system as a whole seems a long way off.

But there is some cause for cautious optimism. Rising numbers of criminal lawyers across HMCTS, the CPS, defence firms and the bar are very encouraging, and should continue to have positive effects on capacity and efficiency as new starters bed in and gain experience. The reduction in average hearing time and waiting time for serious cases where defendants are held in custody are major achievements, and if they can be sustained will have a real positive impact not only on the courts system but also on people affected by those cases: victims, defendants and their families. There will also be positive spillover effects on prisons, with the number of people on remand awaiting trial or sentencing already having fallen almost 10% from its peak in June 2025 to March 2026.

Maintaining and building on these improvements will require ongoing investment in the criminal legal workforce and in administrative and case management capacity in the courts. The new government should focus its efficiency efforts on driving up

hearing hours per sitting day in the crown court and disposals per day in magistrates' courts. The potential gains here are likely to outweigh the highly uncertain benefits from major structural reform, where the government should tread extremely carefully to avoid tipping magistrates' courts over into disaster.

Recommendations

- **Scrap plans to introduce judge-only trials for fraud trials**, and to increase magistrates' sentencing powers and restrict appeals from magistrates' courts.

- Reclassify minor 'either-way' offences as **summary only**, in line with Sir Brian Leveson's recommendation. Allow a maximum sentence of a year in custody for these offences.

- **Maintain the right to elect for trial in the crown court** for more serious either-way offences. If the government wants to abolish this right for some cases, it should only do so for offences where the **maximum sentence is two years or less**, as Leveson recommended.

- If the government wants to grow, or even maintain, the criminal legal workforce, it must **further increase legal aid fees** to a sustainable level and then commit to a means of **adjusting fees in response to inflation** and demand, such as a pay review body.

- Develop a realistic plan to recruit enough people to deal with the **increased workload in magistrates' courts**. This is likely to require a combination of district judges and magistrates.

Prisons and probation

In July 2024, when the Starmer government came into office, the prison system was facing disaster. Prisons were almost out of space, with occupancy levels hitting 99%; existing early release schemes were highly chaotic and had largely reached their limits. Violence was very high, protests and self-harm were both at record levels and all were rising rapidly. Purposeful activity for prisoners – education, employment and training – was very poor,[1] and prisons were struggling with inexperienced staff and high leaving rates.

The state of the probation service was not much better. The Sunak government's ad hoc early release scheme saw thousands of prisoners released, often with only a few hours' notice, making effective preparation for release impossible; at its peak, 14% of people released were sleeping rough.* The unification and renationalisation of the probation service in 2021 had failed to improve its poor performance, with inspectorate ratings falling even further.[2] Caseloads and vacancy rates were very high, and sentence requirements such as unpaid work and rehabilitative activity were not being delivered for many offenders.[3]

Facing this incredibly difficult set of challenges, the Starmer government did an impressive job of stabilising the situation. Within days of the general election, the then justice secretary, Shabana Mahmood, set out a plan for dealing with the immediate capacity crisis in prisons, and also committed to expanding the recruitment of probation officer trainees, addressing (although not resolving) the two most pressing problems. After that, the administration brought in substantial changes to sentencing and policy changes to reduce the active caseload on probation, as well as making some progress in stabilising the workforce.

All this has only been enough to stave off disaster, however. Performance improvements have so far been extremely modest, with violence and deaths in prisons still high and the probation service still failing to deliver adequate risk assessment or manage offenders effectively in the community. And there is no coherent strategy to improve this. Over the summer of this year, the then justice secretary David Lammy appointed Amber Rudd, former Conservative home secretary, to conduct a review into safety and security in prisons. But this will not report for several months, and in the meantime, prisons will continue to struggle with serious problems from drugs, violence and organised crime.[4]

The situation is still more precarious in probation, which is currently facing perhaps its most difficult moment at least since the service was broken up under the coalition government in 2014. Around 4,500 prisoners are being released from October with

* From February to August 2024, when the End of Custody Supervised Licence Scheme saw at least 1,000 prisoners released each month, 14% of all prisoners released were sleeping rough. Ministry of Justice, *'Offender accommodation outcomes, update to March 2025'*.

the implementation of the Sentencing Act 2026.[5] This is on top of thousands more offenders expected to receive suspended sentences rather than short stretches in prison, who will also need supervising.

The Starmer government struggled to substantially increase the number of probation practitioners – probation officers and probation services officers who supervise offenders. This has left probation still far short of the number needed to manage this caseload effectively. If the service makes it through this period without disaster, it will be, one interviewee said, "a miracle". The service deserves real credit for how it has managed an extremely difficult situation and multiple policy changes. But performance improvement is still a long way off.

Table CJS 3.1 **Progress by the Starmer government on its objectives for prisons and probation**

Objective	Progress	Reason
Stabilising prison population growth	**Good progress**	The Starmer government avoided an immediate crisis and passed legislation to stabilise the prison population in the longer term. In June 2026, the prison population was more than 15,000 lower than it was projected to be before Labour entered government. However, the Burnham government's recent changes to prison releases risk undermining this progress.
Expanding prison capacity	**Some progress**	The government successfully delivered around 3,200 new prison places and published a comprehensive prison capacity strategy. However, the net increase in prison places is small, prison expansion is currently behind schedule and thousands of prisoners remain in unsafe cells.
Increasing probation capacity	**Little progress**	The number of probation practitioners has increased just 3% since the general election, while the national vacancy rate for qualified probation officers is 26% – with several areas still facing vacancy rates of 40% or more. Growth in administrative and management staff is welcome, but is unlikely to be enough to improve performance.
Reducing probation workloads	**Some progress**	Policy changes have helped manage probation caseloads by reducing the time offenders are under active supervision. However, these changes were made in a rushed way and have undermined court-imposed sentences, as well as reducing support for people on probation. Practitioner workloads remain very high, although the new Justice Transcribe tool seems to be saving practitioners time.
Improving rehabilitation	**Deteriorated**	Purposeful activity and time out of their cells for prisoners remain very low, while drug use and violence are still rife despite recent improvements in safety. Reduced supervision, limited support from probation and problems accessing commissioned support services are likely to impede rehabilitation.

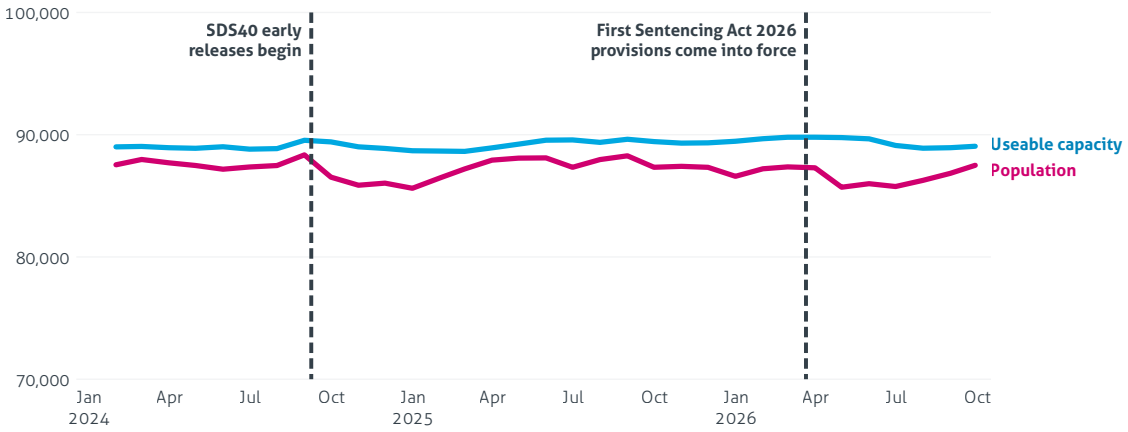
Source: Institute for Government analysis of various sources.

Having navigated the immediate capacity crisis, the Starmer government legislated to reduce long-term demand on prisons

On going into office, the Starmer government had very few options to manage the immediate crisis in prison capacity.[6] It successfully implemented the emergency SDS40 scheme (in full, the 'Standard Determinate Sentences 40% scheme') to release certain prisoners after serving 40% of their sentence, rather than 50%. This generally went well,[7] although initial measures freed up less space than the government might have hoped for. Mahmood also commissioned David Gauke, former Conservative justice secretary, to conduct an independent review into sentencing, with a view to reducing the prison population by around 10,000 over the medium term. This review, published in May 2025,[8] formed the basis of the government's longer-term reform package, the Sentencing Act 2026.

The short-term changes introduced between September 2024 and July 2025 freed up urgently needed spaces in prisons, but were stop-gap measures. It took about six months for the prison population to return to its previous peak after the SDS40 scheme was implemented in September 2024. Only dramatically shortening the time most people spent in prison if they were 'recalled' after release, to just two to four weeks in most cases, brought it back down again. Even so, by March 2026 it had returned to close to its level in July 2024. A longer-term package of measures to get demand on a more stable trajectory was critical.

Figure CJS 3.1 **Prison Population and Capacity, January 2024 to September 2026**



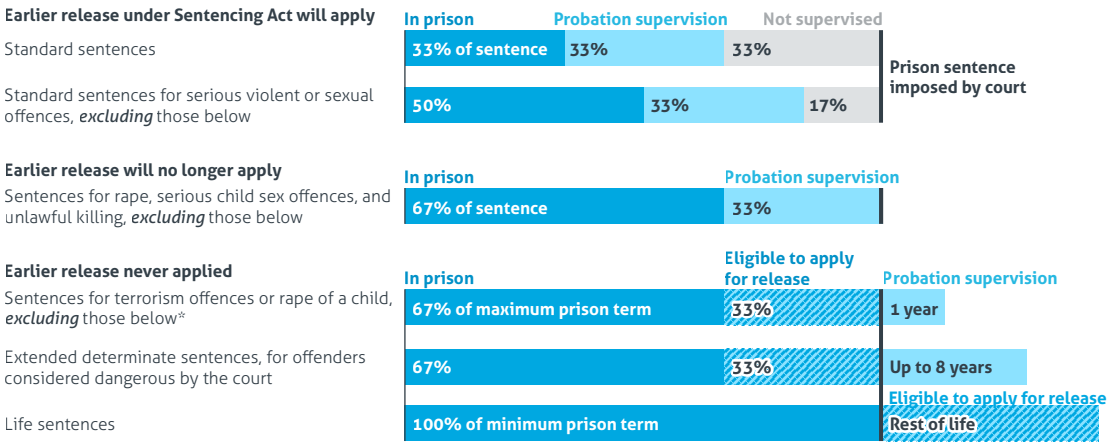
Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Prison population figures', 2024-26. Notes: Figures are as at the end of each month. Useable capacity is total spaces minus the operating margin needed to provide accommodation for different classes of prisoner; this margin has changed over time.

The Sentencing Act 2026 was the Starmer government's answer to this problem, based on the Gauke review. Several measures to reduce the prison population were introduced in spring 2026:

- introducing 'presumption to suspend' prison sentences of 12 months or less, so offenders will not go to prison unless they breach the conditions of their sentence
- increasing the length of sentence that can be suspended from two years to three
- introducing a fixed-length 56-day recall and restricting the use of standard recalls (where the offender remains in prison until released by the parole board or the end of their sentence)
- raising the threshold for refusing bail for those waiting for a trial or sentencing.

These measures already seem to have contributed to a drop in the prison population. But the biggest impact is expected to come from changing the release points for standard sentenced prisoners as part of the 'earned release' or 'progression' model, introduced in stages from October 2026.

Figure CJS 3.2 **Time served in prison and on probation, by sentence type, from October 2026**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of various sources, including MoJ announcements, Criminal Justice Act 2003, Sentencing Act 2020 and Sentencing Act 2026. Notes: Earlier release will no longer apply to specified sexual offences or unlawful killing (manslaughter, death by dangerous driving and causing or allowing the death of a child) as of August 2026. Offenders remain subject to recall for the duration of their sentence. This shows release eligibility in most cases; some prisoners may be released sooner depending on when they were sentenced. Probation supervision may be suspended earlier than shown. Called 'sentences for offenders of particular concern', these must be given to someone convicted of a terror offence or rape or assault by penetration of a child under 13, except where a more serious extended or life sentence is given.

This will see most prisoners who are serving standard determinate sentences (regular prison sentences) released after serving a third of their sentence in prison. They will then be subject to 'intensive supervision' in the community for the second third of their sentence, including in most cases being fitted with an electronic monitoring tag until they are 40% of the way through their sentence.[9] For the final third of their sentence, offenders will not be actively supervised; however they will remain subject to their licence conditions and to recall if they commit a further offence – but, crucially, only if the probation service finds out, which is far from guaranteed.[10]

Some of those serving sentences for serious violent and sexual offences who were previously released after two thirds of their sentence will now be released halfway through.* They will then also be subject to an intensive supervision period, although it is not clear how long this period will be. The most serious sentences – extended determinate sentences, sentences for offenders of particular concern, imprisonment for public protection and life sentences – will be unaffected. These prisoners will continue to have to apply for release once they are eligible, after serving their minimum tariff, and if successful will then be supervised as usual in the community for the remainder of their sentence.

This has produced an even more convoluted system of sentences and releases than we had before, and the Burnham government has made this even worse by subsequently adding further exemptions. As the chart above shows, the same length of sentence imposed by a court could lead to vastly different amounts of time spent in prison, depending on the offence type and the kind of sentence. Some people serving five-year sentences will spend less time in prison than those serving four-year sentences.

* This returns the release point for these prisoners to the pre-2020 status quo, when all prisoners with a fixed-term sentence were released at the halfway point.

Someone given a 'standard' six-year sentence, not considered dangerous or of particular concern by the court, could serve two, three or four years in prison, based on the offence they were convicted of, not on their risk level or behaviour in custody.

Equally importantly, someone released after two years would then have just two years being supervised by probation, or perhaps even less, before their sentence was effectively over. Calling this a 'six-year sentence', when only four years are actually served in prison or under supervision, risks further undermining transparency in sentencing and public trust.

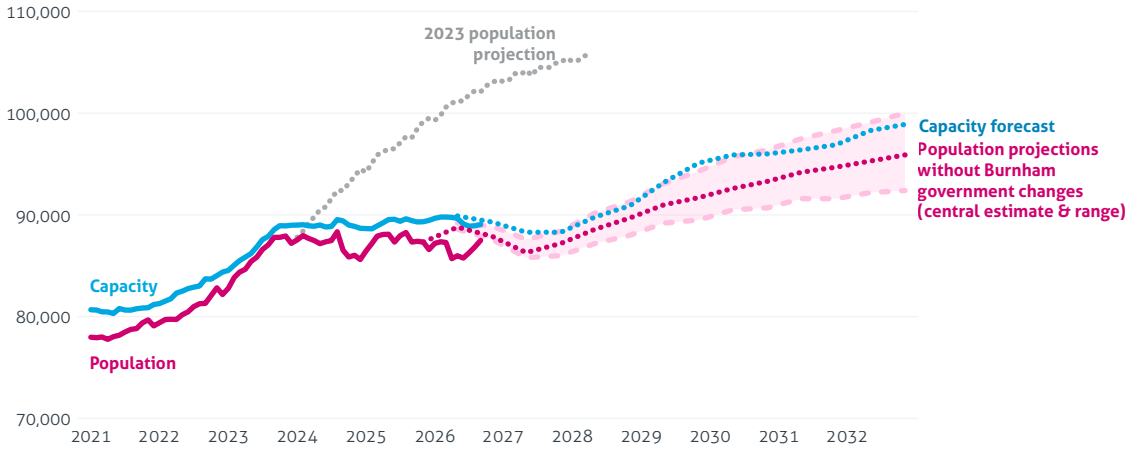
Other measures in the Sentencing Act were introduced earlier and initial indications are positive. The presumption to suspend any sentence of 12 months or less came into effect in late March 2026, as did the changes affecting recalls.* These both seem to have contributed to a rapid drop in the prison population of about 1,600 from March to April 2026.** This decrease has not been sustained, however, with the prison population in September once again approaching record levels. This may be because these offenders are frequently breaching the terms of their sentence, or because the probation service is struggling to manage them effectively in the community. However, the evidence suggests that community sentences have lower reoffending rates than short prison sentences, even for repeat offenders.[11] That means these changes may still reduce reoffending and pressure on the prison population in the medium to long term.

If the Sentencing Act had been implemented in full, projections from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) suggest it would have successfully put prisons on a more stable footing. Capacity would still have been extremely tight, with prisons remaining at 97–98% capacity until at least 2032, and the upper range of population projections continued to exceed estimated capacity. But for the first time in several years, forecast capacity was expected to consistently exceed projected population growth after the Sentencing Act was implemented.

* Previously, prison leavers could be recalled to custody either for a fixed period of 14 days (for a sentence of up to a year) or 28 days (for longer sentences), or for a 'standard' recall, where they would stay in prison for the rest of their sentence or until released by the parole board, whichever came first. 14- and 28-day recalls have been abolished, and replaced with a 56-day recall. Since June 2025, standard recalls can only be used for most offenders if they are subject to multi-agency public protection arrangements or have been charged with a new offence. Since March 2026, a standard recall must be used in these cases. Crucially, from January 2026, this change was applied retrospectively to offenders who were already in prison after a standard recall, so many of these people who had already served 56 days were released in stages in early 2026.

** It will take a year for the full effect of these changes to be felt, but the impact will be front-loaded, given the number of people who previously received fairly short prison sentences of under three months.

Figure CJS 3.3 **Prison capacity and population, January 2021 to November 2032**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Prison population projection: 2023', MoJ, 'Annual statement on prison capacity: 2025' and MoJ, 'Prison population statistics', January 2021 to September 2026. Notes: Population projections include the estimated impact of the Sentencing Act 2026 as originally enacted, but do not include changes announced by the Burnham government in August 2026. Highlighted range shows the difference between low and high population scenarios. Capacity shows useable operational capacity. Actual figures as at the end of each month.

Some of the changes have serious downsides, making sentencing even more opaque and shifting substantial risk onto the probation service. But after years of successive governments utterly failing to tackle this problem, enacting major sentencing reforms was set to be a real achievement of the Starmer government – especially in the face of significant political and public opposition. This progress has been imperilled by the Burnham government's decision to exempt some prisoners from earlier release under the Sentencing Act.

The Burnham government has kept most of the measures in the Sentencing Act, but the changes to prison releases risk further crisis

Immediately after becoming prime minister in July 2026, Burnham announced a 'pause' on the implementation of the progression model of sentencing, which was due to come into effect from 2 September.[12] This was largely in response to significant public backlash and critiques from the victims' commissioner and domestic abuse commissioner.

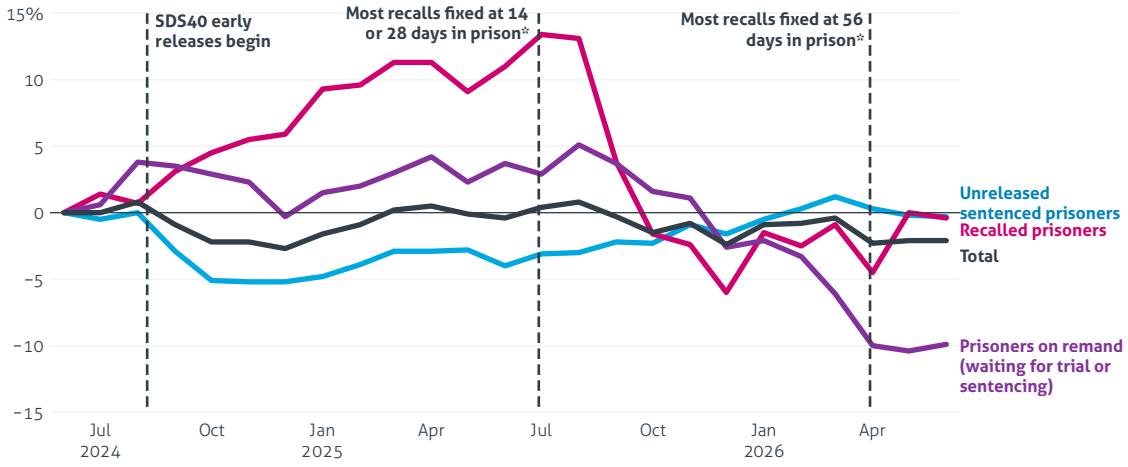
In early August, the government announced that the scheme would go ahead, but would no longer apply to people serving sentences for rape, serious sexual offences against children or grooming offences, whose release point had been due to move from two thirds of their sentence to halfway.[13] In the face of ongoing public pressure, people serving sentences for unlawful killing, including manslaughter and death by dangerous driving, were subsequently also excluded. The most serious of these offenders would already have been excluded as they are serving extended sentences or sentences for offenders of particular concern. Nonetheless, the changes are still expected to reduce the total number of people released earlier under the scheme from around 6,000 to around 4,500.

The new justice secretary, Alex Norris, may have felt empowered to make these changes because the prison population over the summer was somewhat lower than previously projected. But this appears to have been a short-term effect. It was

partly due to changes to recall and short sentences, as set out above. But the biggest contribution to the recent fall in the prison population has come from an unexpected direction: a drop in the number of prisoners held on remand waiting for their trial or sentencing, thanks to the courts managing to hear these cases more quickly.

This has freed up some very welcome additional breathing room in prisons, but may prove challenging to sustain. Focusing heavily on cases where defendants are held on remand means even longer waits for other cases. The new practice direction on listing, implemented in criminal courts from October 2026, emphasises the 'human impact' of delays to hearings, including on both the victim and the defendant.[14] This is likely to encourage prioritisation of some serious cases where the defendant is on bail in the community, particularly rape and serious sexual offences, which may cause the remand population to rise again.

Figure CJS 3.4 **Change in prison population since June 2024, by custody type**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2026' (Prison population: 30 June 2026). Notes: Standard recalls, for the remainder of the sentence, can still be used in certain circumstances. Sentenced prisoners excludes recalled, remand and non-criminal prisoners. Figures are at the last day of each month.

In the past few months, the headroom in prisons has been steadily shrinking. As of 28 September, it stood at just over 1,100 spaces in adult men's prisons, down more than 200 on the previous week and 67% lower than at the end of April.[15] Exempting some offenders from earlier release under the Sentencing Act may well wipe out such razor-thin margins and mean the government is forced into yet more emergency capacity measures before new cells come online.

Prison expansion is already behind schedule, leaving prisoners in unsafe cells

Avoiding a further capacity crisis in this parliament also relies on the other piece of the puzzle: expanding the prison estate to increase the supply of spaces. The prison population is currently slightly below projections, but even so, it is likely to swiftly rise to overtake existing capacity. Delivering additional prison spaces on schedule is necessary to avoid once again running out of room in prisons.

Around 3,200 new prison places have been added since 2024,[16] largely due to the opening of a new prison in March 2025 (1,500 spaces) and temporary 'rapid deployment cells' (around 900 spaces).[17] But the net increase in capacity has been negligible: a few hundred spaces at most.[18] This is because around the same number of cells have been taken out of use,[19] due to dilapidation, safety concerns or other problems.

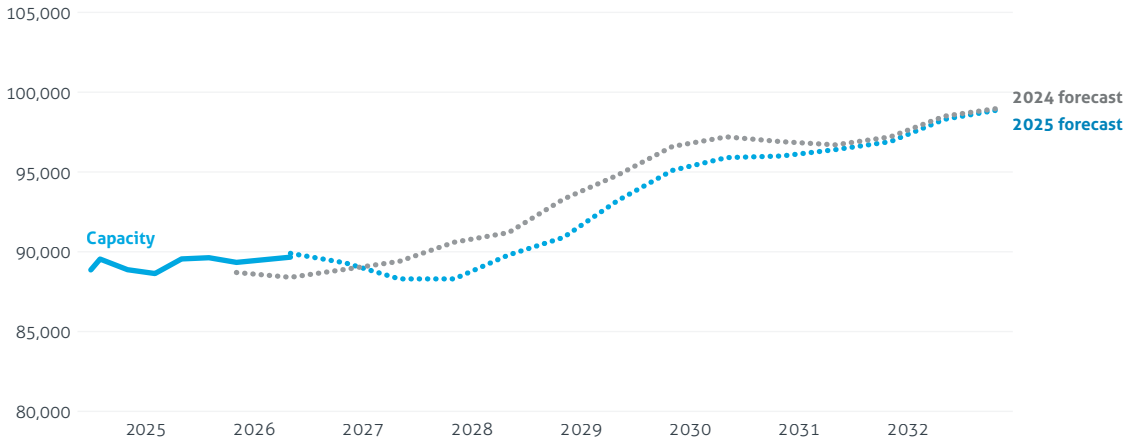
Both of the major expansion projects delivered since 2024 were initiated and largely delivered by previous Conservative governments; it currently takes at least seven years to construct a new prison.[20] Capacity is currently higher than projected, but that is mostly because of delays to planned maintenance work that will temporarily take cells out of use, including upgrading cells that are not fire safe. This means capacity is likely to decline before it rises again.

In December 2024, the National Audit Office estimated that the maintenance backlog in prisons was £1.8bn, with a further £1bn required by 2030 to bring the whole estate into a "fair condition", including making all cells fire safe.[21] By comparison, the cumulative maintenance budget across 2024/25 and 2025/26 was just £520m – well short of the sums required.[22] There also needs to be enough headroom in prisons to take cells out of use to complete essential maintenance.

The pipeline of planned expansion has already been delayed since 2024, with the rapid expansion of places now not due to start until 2028, rather than early 2027 (partly because of delays to planned fire safety works). The government is now not projecting to hit 90,000 prison spaces across England and Wales until November 2028, around a year later than planned.[23] In January 2026, it claimed it was still on track to meet its target of 14,000 new places by 2031, but because of cells being taken out of use or lost to disrepair, the net increase will be substantially lower than this.

The delay appears to be largely due to the collapse of supplier ISG in September 2024, which was the main contractor for 17% of the MoJ's planned additional spaces.[24] In 2025, this led the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA) to downgrade three key prison expansion projects from amber to red, meaning successful and timely delivery "appears unachievable".[25] The large expansions from 2028 on are principally from new houseblocks in existing prisons, with some new prisons as well; these are more likely to be subject to unexpected delays than refurbishments or rapid deployment cells.[26]

Figure CJS 3.5 **Prison capacity, actual and forecast, July 2024 to November 2032**



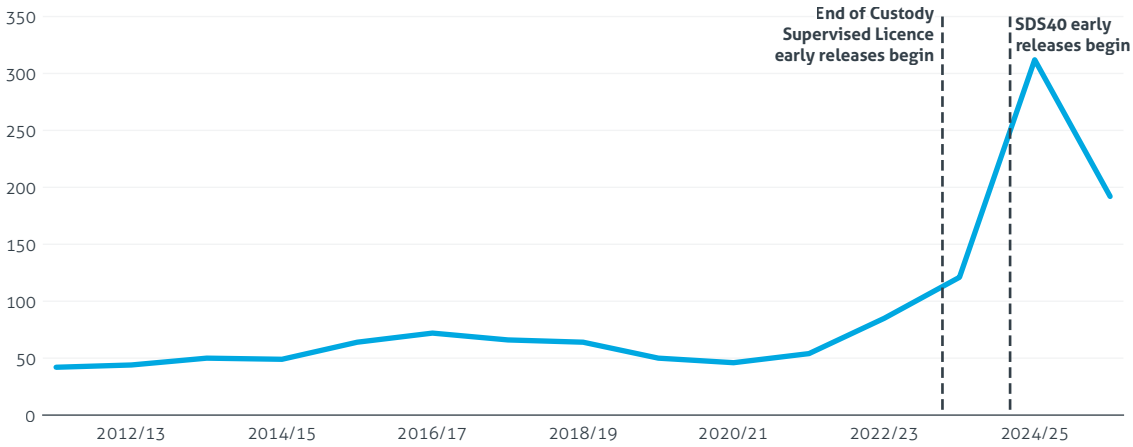
Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Annual statement on prison capacity: 2024', MoJ, 'Annual statement on prison capacity: 2025' and MoJ, 'Prison population statistics', May 2025 to May 2026. Notes: Capacity shows useable operational capacity.

Capacity pressure and delays to maintenance work are leaving thousands of prisoners in unsafe cells. As of 2024/25, 44% of cells did not have suitable in-cell fire detectors.[27] The Starmer government abandoned plans to remove prisoners from non-compliant cells by the end of 2027, and set no new deadline to achieve this.[28] Prisoners are particularly vulnerable to death and serious injury from fires because they cannot escape their cells, and fires are becoming increasingly frequent in the prison estate. Recorded fires in prisons increased 124% from 2019/20 to 2024/25, and there were more than 500 fire-related injuries in each of 2023/24 and 2024/25.[29] The Crown Premises Fire Safety Inspectorate issued eight prisons with 'Step Away' notices from August 2024 to June 2026, indicating that it would be pursuing criminal proceedings were it not for the fact that publicly run prisons are immune from prosecution over fire safety.[30]

Early release schemes and the struggle to manage capacity have caused releases in error to soar, although there has been progress in the past year

Releases in error have risen sharply in the past few years, largely thanks to the introduction of new and more complicated rules governing when people are released. This began before the various emergency early release schemes, as changes to sentencing – such as releasing certain serious offenders after two thirds of their sentence, rather than half – made calculating release dates more complex. But releases in error increased substantially during the Sunak government's End of Custody Supervised Licence (ECSL) scheme and then much more after the Starmer government's change to release certain prisoners after serving 40% of their sentence (the SDS40 scheme). There were more than two and a half times as many releases in error in 2024/25 as in 2023/24, and more than three and a half times as many as in 2022/23.

Figure CJS 3.6 **Prisoners identified as having been released in error, 2011/12–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'HMPPS Annual Digest, April 2025 to March 2026'. Figures show prisoners identified as having been released when they should have continued to be held in custody; those held unlawfully and released late are not included.

These errors are largely the predictable result of complex rules being applied by a system in crisis.[31] There is a digital tool to calculate release dates, but it cannot be used in all cases, and because different parts of the criminal justice system use different systems, staff often rely on paper records or manual workarounds.[32] In some cases, there are contradictions between prisoners' digital and physical records (as was the case with Hadush Kebatu – the failed asylum seeker who was released in error, rather than being deported, after being convicted of sexual assault).[33]

> **Every change requires updated guidance and recalculations of eligibility and release dates. The cumulative effect is a complex policy and operational environment, with layers of changing operational guidance... hard pressed operational officers and staff are now operating in a landscape that is more complex than any time in recent history.**[34] – Dame Lynne Owens, independent Review into Releases in Error

It is also important to consider the flip side of releases in error: unlawful detentions, when a prisoner is not released when they should be. Interviewees generally thought unlawful detention is happening significantly more frequently than releases in error,[35] but there is currently no published data on this. Lynne Owens, in her review of releases in error, found that "it is highly likely that unlawful detentions present material financial and reputational risks for HMPPS [HM Prison and Probation Service]",[36] while a random dip sample of releases conducted by the MoJ found 14 unlawful detentions in a sample of 386 cases – with the longest of these held unlawfully for 12 days. The same sample found only two releases in error.[37]

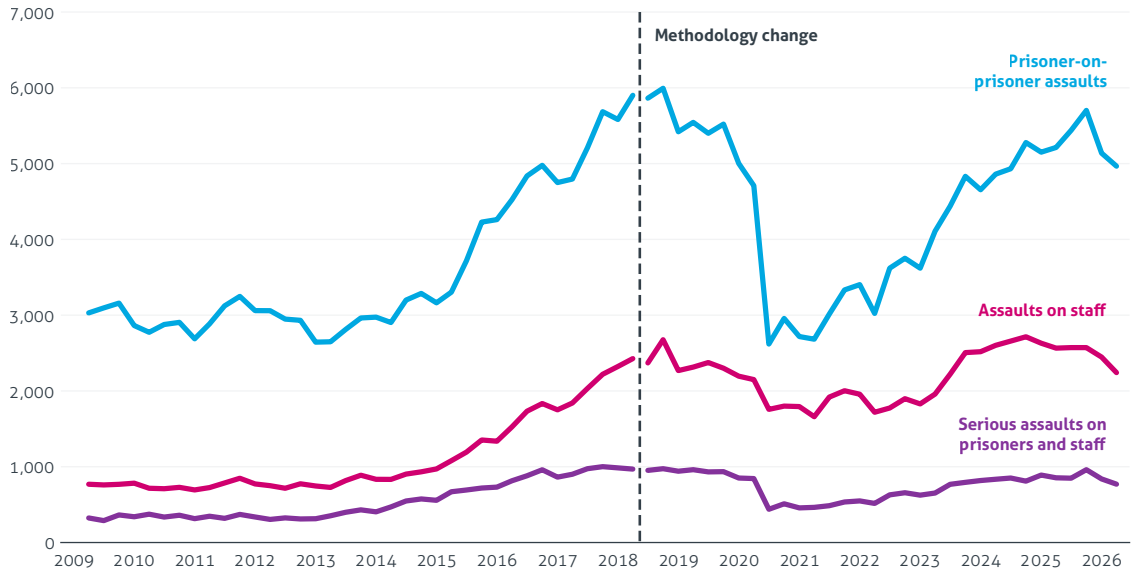
The Starmer government's immediate response to releases in error was to bolster manual checks, including introducing a new release checklist to be signed off by a senior prison officer, and to pledge additional funding for digital and AI-based solutions to releases in error. These changes were introduced from November 2025, so may have contributed to fewer releases in error in 2025/26. Equally, however, this may have simply been the result of changes bedding in and slightly more time for staff to make decisions.

Under Starmer, the MoJ committed itself to investing up to £4m to expand the Calculate Release Dates service, produced by the in-house MoJ digital team, to "deliver a fully end-to-end system, with court data flowing straight into the correct prison record", within two years.[38] Calculate Release Dates is part of Prison Digital Services, which is generally highly rated by prison staff.[39] Nonetheless, this end-to-end system is extremely ambitious and seems unlikely to be achievable in the current context, particularly given the ongoing limitations of Common Platform, the case management system in the criminal courts.[40]

The slight easing of capacity pressure has seen violence, deaths and protests in prisons all start to improve

The breathing room on capacity from around October 2025 to June 2026 had a noticeable impact on prisons. While interviewees still emphasised high rates of violence, drug use and organised crime within prisons, there was a general sense that the slight reduction in capacity pressure has allowed prisons to start to focus on improving conditions and bringing down violence, which was approaching record highs.

Figure CJS 3.7 **Prison assaults, by type, Q2 2009 to Q1 2026**

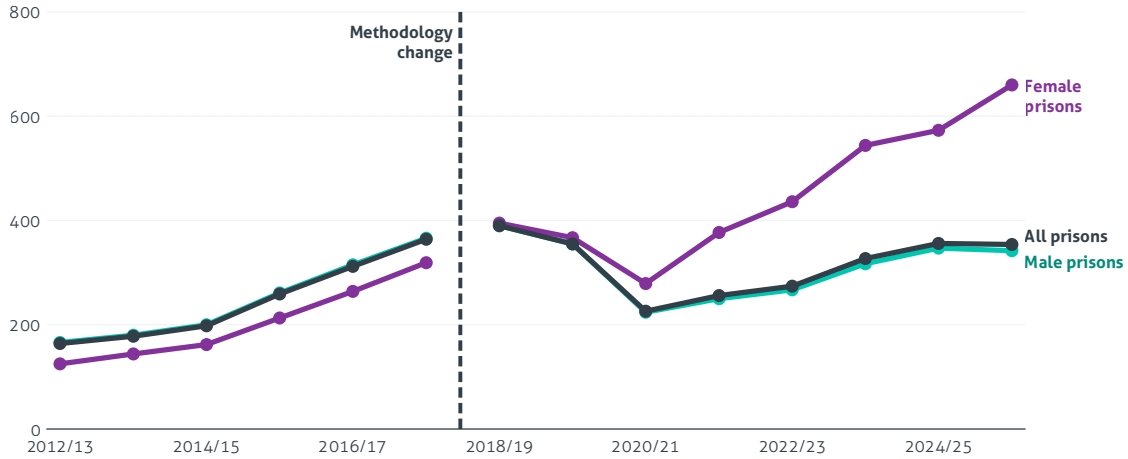


Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Safety in custody statistics: January to March 2026'. Figures from Q2 2018 onwards exclude incidents occurring within the youth estate. Figures are for assault incidents; more than one person may be assaulted in any one incident. Serious assaults are a subset of total assaults.

The assault rate per 1,000 prisoners was still 8% higher in 2025/26 than in 2023/24, but in the most recent quarter it was 3% lower than when Labour came into office.* September 2025 to March 2026 saw the biggest drop in assaults outside the pandemic, when prisoners were largely confined to their cells. The assault rate in women's prisons has, however, continued to climb and was almost twice as high as the rate in men's prisons in 2025/26. There were 660 assaults, 47 of them serious, for every 1,000 prisoners in women's prisons. This compares to 342 assaults, 39 of them serious, for every 1,000 prisoners in men's prisons.

* These figures are not exactly comparable as figures from before Q2 2018 exclude incidents occurring within the youth estate. However, this has a minimal impact on the total or the trend.

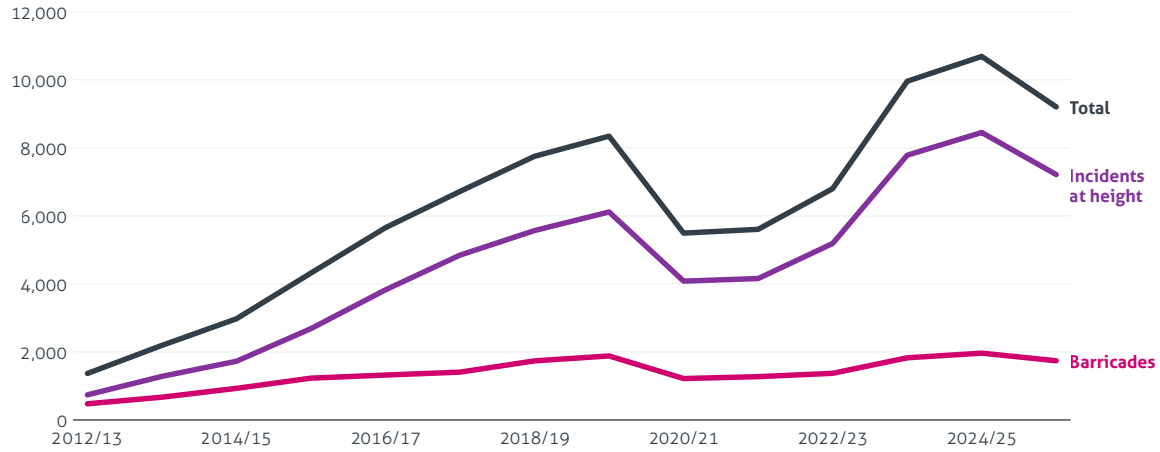
Figure CJS 3.8 **Prison assaults per 1,000 prisoners, by sex of prison, 2012/13–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Safety in custody statistics' ('Table 4'), 2014 to 2026. Notes: Figures from Q2 2018 onwards exclude incidents occurring within the youth estate. Figures are for assault incidents per 1,000 prisoners; more than one person may be assaulted in any one incident.

There has also been a sharp drop in protesting behaviour. Incidents at height (when prisoners climb on netting or roofs) and making barricades (obstructing access to part of the prison) fell 15% and 11% respectively from 2024/25 to 2025/26, and are both now lower than when Labour came into office in July 2024. Strikingly, these mark the first declines outside of the pandemic since 2012/13. Both self-harm and deaths have also fallen, down 10% and 12% respectively in the 12 months to March 2026 relative to the previous year. However, homicides are very high, with a record eight homicides in the 12 months to June 2026 and seven in the previous year, compared to a typical range of zero to three in earlier years.[41]

Figure CJS 3.9 **Protest incidents in prison, total and selected types, 2012/13–2025/26**



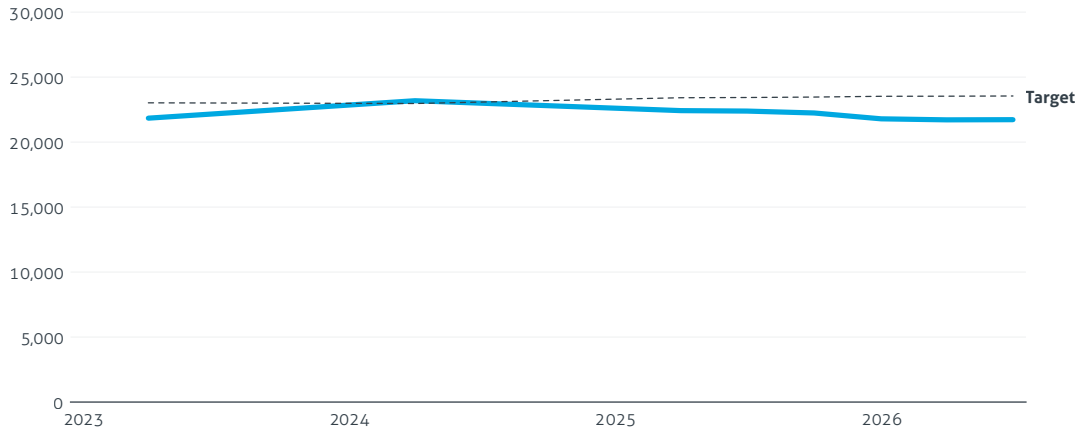
Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'HMPPS Annual Digest, April 2025 to March 2026' ('Chapter 5 Tables – Protesting Behaviour'). Notes: Incidents at height refers to prisoners climbing on roofs, netting or similar. Barricades are when prisoners obstruct lawful access to a part of the prison. Other protesting behaviours included in the total include hostage-taking and concerted indiscipline.

These improvements are extremely welcome and make a real difference to the prison environment for both prisoners and staff. But there are still serious problems with violence and disorder in prisons and gains so far are unlikely to be sustained with prisons now back above 98% occupancy levels.[42] Any delays to the release of prisoners who have already been given a release date, such as due to further policy changes, may also create serious flashpoints for violence and disorder that will need to be managed.

Prisons are increasingly short of prison officers, making packed prisons harder to manage

After years of being understaffed, prisons finally hit their target staffing level for band 3–5 prison officers in March 2024,* under the Conservative government. But staffing levels quickly began to deteriorate as recruitment efforts wound down. By June 2026, prisons were facing a vacancy rate for prison officers in publicly run prisons of 8%. This has primarily been driven by falling prison officer numbers, rather than an increase in the number of officers required.** While the leaving rate for band 3–4 prison officers has fallen from a high of 16% in 2021/22 and 2022/23 to 11% in 2025/26, this still means a high level of recruitment is needed to maintain existing officer numbers. In 2023/24, more than 4,800 people became band 3–4 prison officers, compared to just over 3,000 in 2025/26.[43]

Figure CJS 3.10 **Prison officers in public sector prisons, Q1 2023 to Q2 2026**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'HMPPS workforce quarterly: March 2026'. Notes: Staffing data is not available for privately run prisons.

Staff shortages continue to create operational challenges for prisons. They make it harder to maintain safety, ensure prisoners attend work and education, and allow prisoners enough time out of their cells.[44] These are likely to become harder to manage as capacity pressure increases again.

* This refers to publicly run prisons only, as staffing data is not available for privately run prisons.
** While a large new prison did open during this period, HMP Millsike, this is privately operated and so is not included in this data.

Reducing demand on prisons has shifted the burden to probation, which is already failing to meet its core requirements

The probation service is currently failing in its basic roles of rehabilitation and public protection. Not a single probation delivery unit that was inspected in 2024 or 2025 received a rating above 'requires improvement', and two thirds were rated 'inadequate' across *all a*reas of service delivery, meaning that fewer than half of cases met the required standard.[45] The best-performing unit received a total score of 10 out of 21. Protecting the public is consistently the worst-performing area, with two thirds of cases rated insufficient across the country. The chief inspector of probation became so concerned by this that in late 2025 the inspectorate paused its standard inspection programme to focus exclusively on public protection.[46]

Both the short-term emergency releases and the Sentencing Act reforms will shift even more pressure onto this failing system.

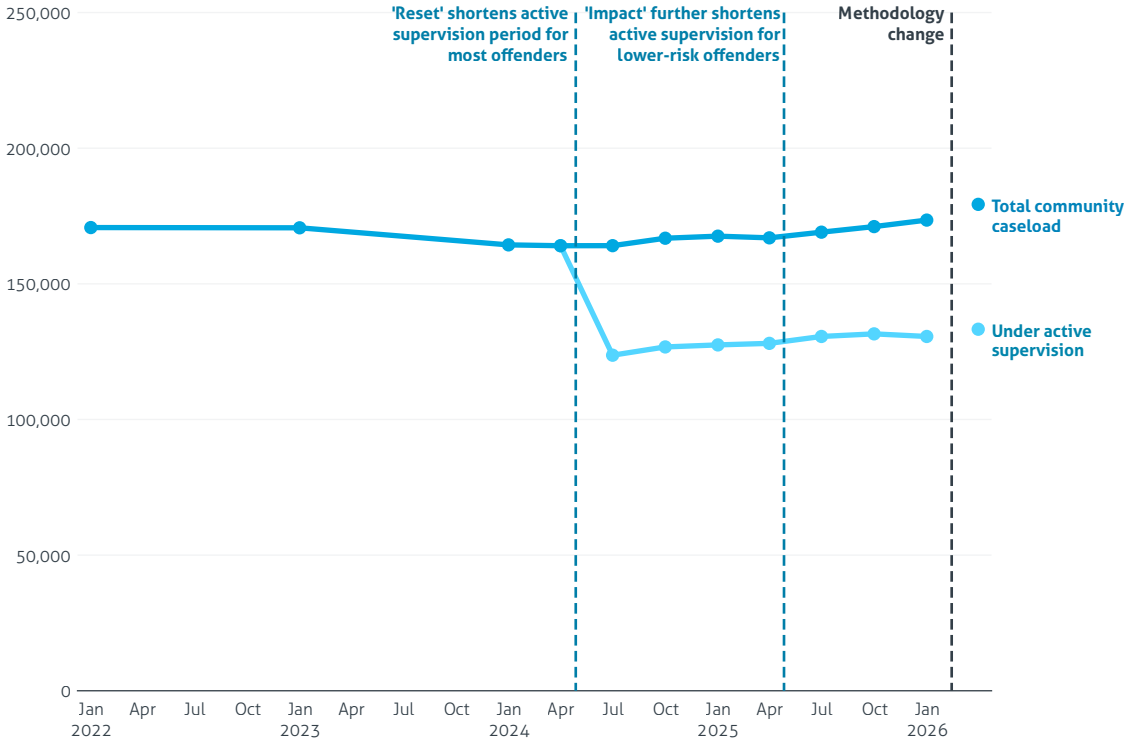
Probation supervises three groups of offenders:

- people given community or suspended sentences by the court
- prison leavers
- people serving a sentence in prison.

People in custody are supervised by probation practitioners based in prisons, with a focus on sentence planning and preparation for release. Supervision in the community, meanwhile, is focused on risk monitoring and support.

The increase in probation's overall community caseload due to early release schemes was fairly small, with the total caseload rising around 6% from June 2024 to December 2025. However, offenders being supervised after release are typically more complex and more likely to be high risk than those serving community or suspended sentences.[47,48] Around 4,500 additional people are expected to be released earlier from October 2026 to June 2027, equivalent to almost 10% of the total post-release caseload a year earlier. Altogether, the post-release caseload is likely to be at least 15–20% higher by the end of 2026 than it was in June 2024.

Figure CJS 3.11 **Probation post-release caseload, total and under active supervision, Q4 2022 to Q1 2026**



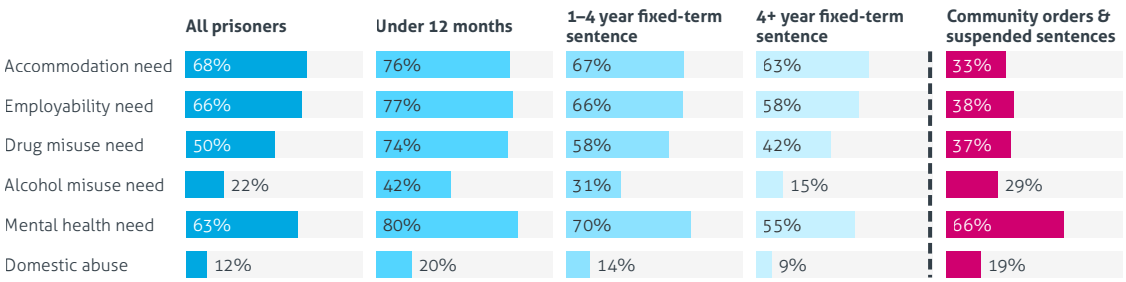
Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2025' and MoJ, 'Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2026. Notes: Community caseload excludes offenders in custody on pre-release supervision. From April 2024, Probation Reset stopped supervision for most people on probation after two-thirds of their sentence. For sentences started after April 2025, Impact restricted active supervision after 16 weeks, except for offenders at higher risk of harm or who met specific exclusion criteria. Due to changes to MoJ data processing, data for March 2026 is not directly comparable to earlier points.

People released under emergency early release schemes also often had very limited preparation for release, because they were often released with little warning and as part of a large group. This put extreme pressure on offender management units in prisons. In theory, probation staff in prisons should help prisoners arrange accommodation, benefits applications and medical support for when they are released, but much of this work is not happening effectively, if at all.[49]

This has created extra work for probation practitioners in the community and made it harder for prison leavers to get appropriate accommodation or support set up promptly. The return to a more normal rhythm of releases should ameliorate some of this by enabling better preparation for release. But the sheer number of releases will still be hard to manage.

The presumption to suspend sentences of 12 months or less will also drive up the probation caseload, and this cohort typically has the most complex needs of any offenders. In October 2024, 74% of people serving prison sentences under 12 months had an identified need around drug misuse, compared to 50% of all prisoners and 37% of people on community sentences.[50] In addition, there is a severe shortage of available housing, which will continue to make effective supervision challenging.[51]

Figure CJS 3.12 **Offenders' identified needs, by sentence type and length, as at 31 October 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Identified offender needs, custody and community, 31 October 2024'. Notes: Fixed-term or determinate sentences exclude those serving life sentences or Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences. Figures relate to adults.

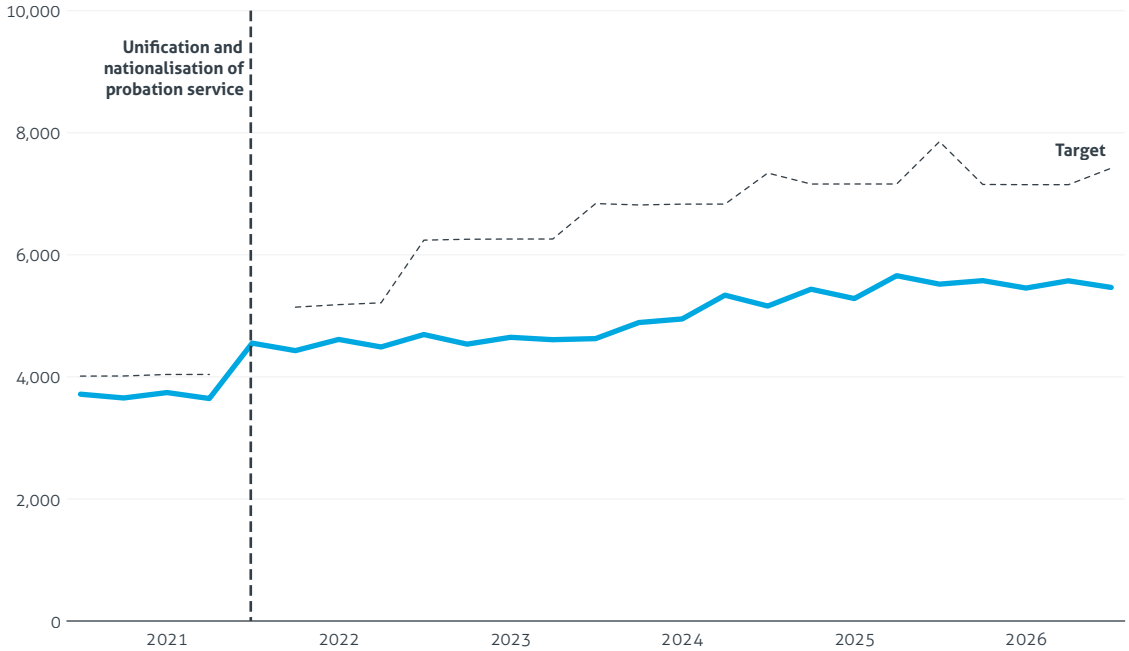
All this amounts to a very substantial increase in demand on the probation service, at a time when the service is already seriously overstretched and performing poorly. There are a number of reasons for this poor performance, but the most critical are insufficient capacity in the service and staff inexperience.[52,53] The MoJ has recognised the yawning capacity gap in probation and has taken a two-pronged approach to address it:

- increasing the number of probation officers and other practitioners
- reducing the amount of supervision and intervention that most people on probation receive.

Slow progress on recruitment means probation practitioners are still overstretched and ill-equipped to absorb additional demand

There has been a serious staff shortage in probation for several years, with the number of probation officers consistently 25–30% below target staffing. As of March 2026, nine probation delivery units (8% of the total) had a vacancy rate of 40% or more.[54]

Figure CJS 3.13 **Probation officers, Q2 2020 to Q2 2026**

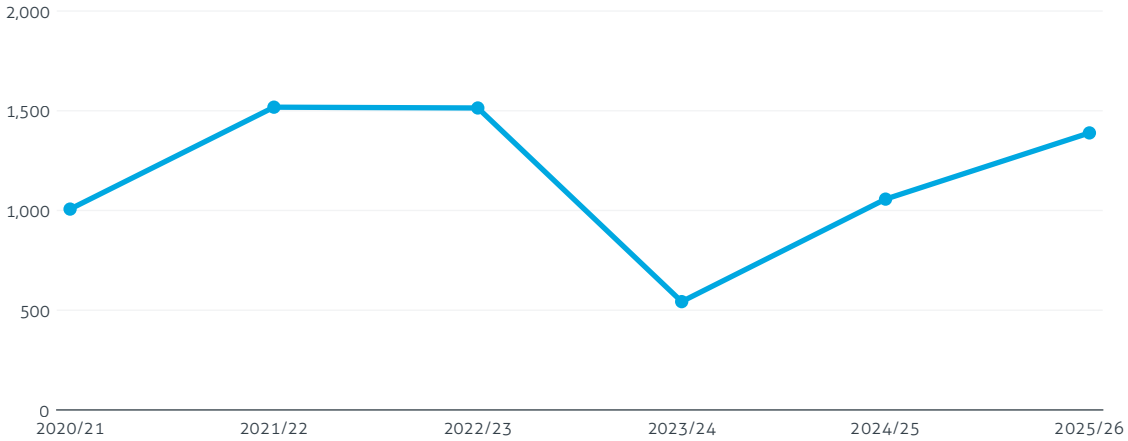


Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'HMPPS workforce quarterly: June 2026' ('Prison and Probation Officer staffing levels against targets: June 2026'). Notes: Figures show probation officers within the National Probation Service/HMPPS and exclude any probation officers within commissioned Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs). In June 2021, the National Probation Service and CRCs were unified and nationalised.

Despite a major recruitment drive and some improvement in retention, the number of probation practitioners has risen by only 3% since June 2024. This includes both qualified probation officers and more junior probation services officers, some of whom are training for their probation officer qualification. Most of the increase has come from qualified probation officers, whose numbers are up 8%, as trainees who started during the 2021/22–2022/23 recruitment drive have qualified. But because these officers were already working as probation services officers, the overall increase in practitioners has been much smaller.

The number of trainee probation officers starting has also increased, but from an extremely low base. The total number recruited over 2024/25 and 2025/26 was just under 2,500, which remained well below the 3,000 recruited over 2021/22 and 2022/23.[55] The government is expecting the supervision capacity gap in 2026/27 to remain over 20% of target staffing (equivalent to around 3,150 full-time employees), and is still not expecting to hit the target level by September 2027.[56]

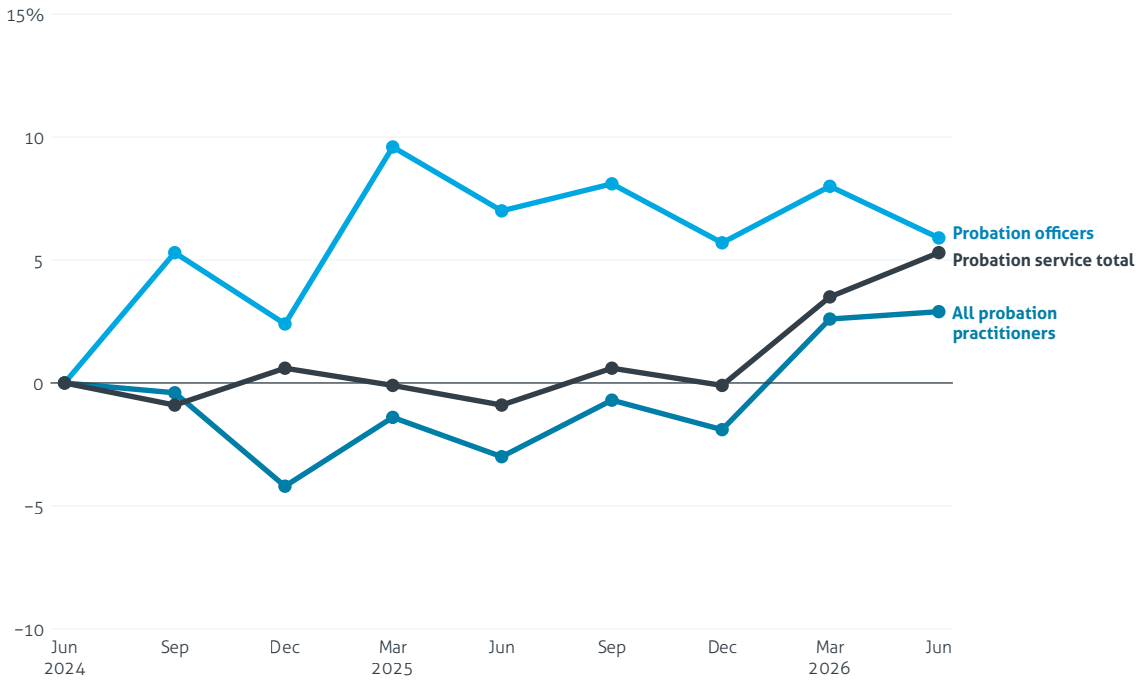
Figure CJS 3.14 **Trainee probation officer new starters, 2020/21–2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of HMPPS, 'Trainee Probation Officer starters: April 2025 to March 2026'.

However, there has been good progress on increasing the overall number of people working in the probation service, including in management and administrative roles. This is up 6.7% since June 2024. Our previous work has highlighted the importance of these back-office roles in the productivity and performance of the whole service, so this is very welcome to see. Nonetheless, the service as a whole remains unable to cope with its existing workload, let alone the large increase due to be implemented under the Sentencing Act 2026.

Figure CJS 3.15 **Change in probation staff numbers since Q2 2024, total and selected groups**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'HMPPS workforce quarterly: March 2025' and MoJ, 'HMPPS workforce quarterly: June 2026'. Notes: Probation practitioners are probation officers and probation services officers, including trainees. Probation service total shows all staff working in probation service functions, while probation officers and probation practitioners show all staff in the relevant probation grades, including those working in prisons. Figures are full-time equivalent (FTE).

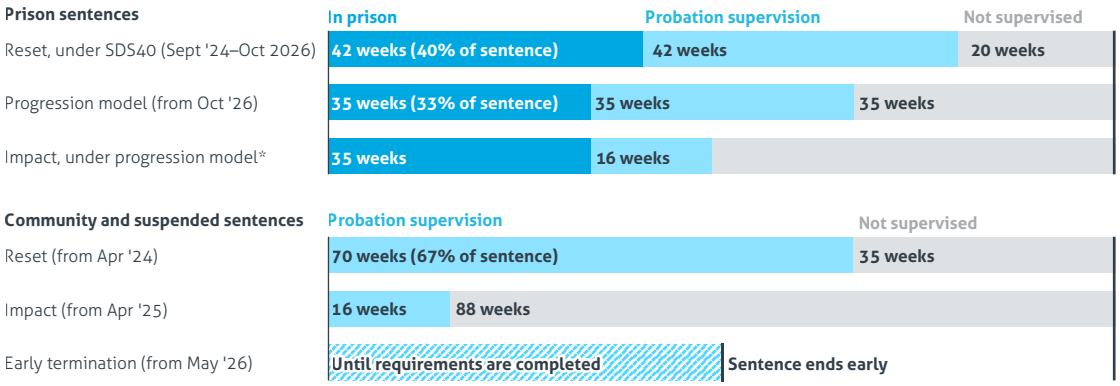
Rationing probation supervision is necessary to manage demand, but has serious drawbacks

Given staff shortages, the government is also relying on reducing the size of the probation caseload and cutting the amount of supervision that most offenders receive, to manage demand. HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) has set a goal of reducing workload by 25% by March 2027.[57] This approach started in spring 2024 under the Sunak government with the 'Probation Reset programme, which suspends active supervision in the final third of an offender's sentence (for community sentences) or licence (for prison leavers). During this period, offenders do not have meetings or other contact with their probation practitioner or receive rehabilitative support, but remain subject to the other conditions of their sentence, such as abiding by any exclusion zones or contact restrictions. Prison leavers on Reset remain subject to recall, although in practice this relies on the probation service becoming aware of any breaches or further offences they commit.

The Starmer government built on Reset through its 'Impact' programme, which was launched in April 2025 and suspends contact for most offenders much earlier, after just 16 weeks' supervision. This means that an eligible offender who receives a 12-month community order will in fact be monitored for less than four months, even though they will technically remain on the probation caseload for the whole period.

Once the progression model in the Sentencing Act 2026 is fully implemented, most offenders will be supervised for a third of their sentence, and then spend the final portion of their sentence (also a third, in most cases) on licence, but without any active supervision. The government has not yet announced how this will interact with the Reset and Impact programmes.[58]

Figure CJS 3.16 **Time in prison and on probation for a standard two-year sentence, under different reform programmes**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of various sources, including MoJ announcements and Sentencing Act 2026. Notes: Figures have been rounded to the nearest week. *It has not yet been confirmed whether Impact will still apply to prison leavers once the progression model is implemented. Prison leavers remain subject to recall for the duration of their sentence. Does not include time spent on Home Detention Curfew. Suspended sentences can be 'activated', meaning the offender is sent to prison, at any time during their suspension, including once supervision and other requirements have ended.

Both programmes exclude certain offenders, such as those deemed to pose a very high risk of harm, subject to multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) or active child protection orders, and people convicted of sexual offences. But it is still likely to apply to most people on probation, including most prison leavers. Once the progression model of sentencing is fully implemented, most prison leavers will spend the final third of their sentence in this limbo: subject to restrictions and recall to prison, but with no active engagement with the probation service.

There are serious drawbacks to these programmes. They mean that the length of sentence imposed by the court becomes essentially a fiction for most offenders, risking further undermining public trust in the criminal justice system and making sentences even more convoluted and opaque, including to victims. It may also run counter to other reforms aiming to encourage community and suspended sentences over prison sentences: if courts do not view 16 weeks' supervision as adequate to the crime, they may impose a prison sentence.

At the same time, the Reset and Impact programmes increase the risk that probation practitioners are being asked to carry. Because offenders technically remain on the probation caseload, their supervising practitioner is still likely to feel pressure and anxiety about any further offences they commit, particularly serious ones. This is especially true given the decision to suspend contact is based on the practitioner's assessment of risk level. This can theoretically be reassessed at any point, but once contact has ceased, practitioners will rarely have any information that allows them to do a meaningful reassessment. In a service that has become increasingly risk averse – as seen, for example, in rapidly rising recall rates – this may create perverse incentives to categorise offenders as high risk unnecessarily, or to recall people to custody for minor breaches, even if doing so ultimately harms the offender's chances of rehabilitation.

It would have been preferable to remove people from the probation caseload entirely at the point supervision ceases, both under Reset and Impact and the progression model for custodial sentences. This would be more transparent for judges and magistrates passing sentences, and for the public. It would also provide greater clarity – and less anxiety – for practitioners, without having any meaningful impact on risk levels or support for offenders. Finally, supervision in name only risks undermining its own effectiveness, if it means there are no practical consequences for breaches.

The progression model introduced in the Sentencing Act 2026 involves a similar approach to the Reset and Impact programmes, with supervision being suspended in the final part of the offender's sentence. It is not clear how these programmes will interact with the progression model of sentences for prison leavers described above, which theoretically involves offenders being supervised for at least a third of their total sentence. If the Impact programme continues to apply, someone serving a six-year sentence for a non-violent offence (such as serious fraud) would have their probation supervision end before they were originally due to be released from prison.

The Sentencing Act also introduced yet another programme to reduce demand on probation: the early termination programme, which allows community and suspended sentences to be ended early. Previously, a sentence could only be terminated early for good behaviour by returning to court to sign off on the termination. Now, a panel of senior probation officers can decide to terminate an order early, so long as all sentence requirements have been completed and the offender passes a police record check.

This programme has several advantages over Reset and Impact. First, it is based on probation practitioners' professional judgment. An offender's probation supervisor must recommend them for early termination if they believe it is appropriate, and that decision must then be approved by the senior panel. Second, it also removes the offender entirely from the probation caseload, rather than simply suspending contact, which is better for both sides. And third, by ensuring that sentence requirements have been met – unlike Reset and Impact – it improves transparency and preserves the intention of the sentencing court much more effectively. Inevitably, however, these factors are likely to mean it has a slower effect on the probation workload. The government should monitor both the number of early terminations and the outcomes of these cases compared to those in Reset and Impact, and consider whether either or both of these predecessors can be revoked.

The probation service is also using another means of managing demand: Justice Transcribe, an AI tool that probation practitioners use to produce a summary of their meetings with people on probation and reduce the time spent writing up notes. Many probation practitioners and managers are extremely positive about the impact Justice Transcribe has had in terms of saving time and allowing them to focus more on sentencing planning and working with offenders.[59,60] HMPPS aims to achieve roughly a 6% reduction in demand on staff through the use of Justice Transcribe and other digital tools.[61]

The scramble to increase probation capacity has led to constant policy churn, with policies being implemented before they were even finalised

The environment of constant policy change and mixed messages created by all these different programmes has been difficult and stressful for staff to navigate. In a service that has experienced near-constant organisational change since it was broken up in 2014, one senior practitioner described this as "the toughest year yet".

There is also a strong feeling among front-line staff that those designing these policies had little appreciation for what was happening on the ground. This has led to policies being rolled out while still only half-developed, and being adapted on the fly in response to operational realities.[62] As a result, staff are struggling to keep on top of frequently changing operational requirements and feel like their professional judgment is being sidelined in favour of centrally imposed policies, with little autonomy or flexibility in how they are applied.

> **A lot of what we are implementing is massively over-engineered... It feels like we are developing a painting-by-numbers approach, rather than trusting professionals to do a good job.** – Probation practitioner

Burnham's early decision, within two days of being prime minister, to pause the early release scheme then due to start in September, caused further turmoil and confusion among both prison and probation staff.[63] Pushing the implementation back to 1 October meant recalculating release dates for 700 offenders who were due to be released in September.[64] This wasted the preparation for offenders' release that had already been done and will further squeeze capacity in probation, housing and other support services for October.

The probation service is critically in need of a period of stability to allow changes to bed in and staff to refocus on day-to-day offender management.

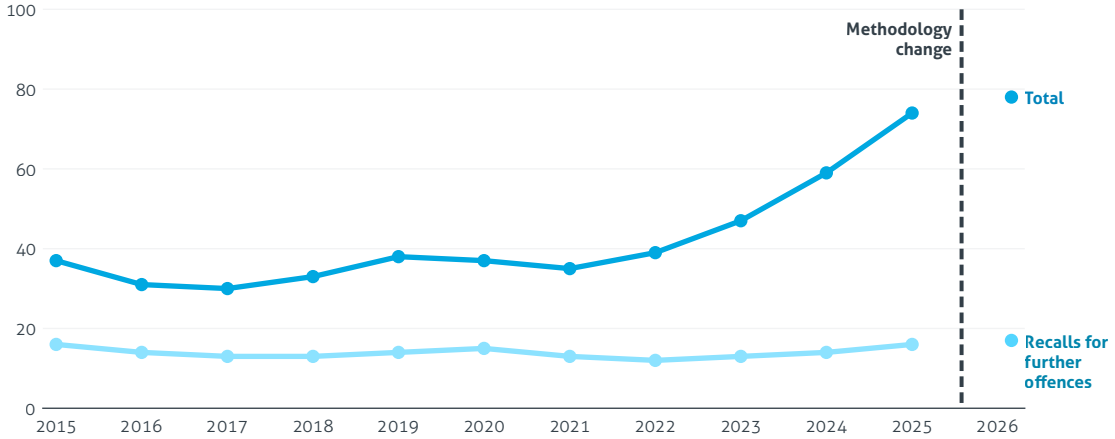
Pressure on probation means the service is struggling to manage cases effectively in the community

The rate at which prison leavers are recalled to custody is a key performance metric for probation. A certain level of recalls is likely to be a sensible means of risk management, but when recalls are being used very frequently, it is a sign that the probation service cannot adequately manage its caseload in the community. This has also become a major source of demand on prisons, with people recalled to custody making up 14% of the total prison population in March 2026 – up from just 8% 10 years before. Almost all prison leavers will at some point no longer be subject to supervision and recall, so it is not an effective long-term risk management strategy. The probation service needs to do all it can to ensure that people are no longer a risk to the public at the point supervision ends.

The number of recalls has skyrocketed in recent years, almost entirely driven by 'administrative recalls', when offenders breach the terms of their licence, rather than recalls for a further offence. In 2025, there were 74 recalls for every 100 people

being supervised after release from prison, up from 35 in 2021.* Of those 74, 16 were because the offender had been charged with a further offence – up slightly from 13 in 2021, but still accounting for less than a quarter of all recalls. Half of all recalls were for those serving a sentence of under 12 months. In the first quarter of 2026, more people were recalled to prison than were released at the end of their sentence – the first time this has ever happened.

Figure CJS 3.17 **Recalls per 100 people on probation after release from prison, total and for further offences, 2015–26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2025' ('Probation 2025' file) and MoJ, 'Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2026'. Notes: Figures shows total annual recalls per 100 people on the probation caseload after release from prison, at the end of the calendar year, except for 2026, which shows an annualised estimate based on January to March data. Recalls for further offences include any recall after a charge for a further offence. Other reasons for recall include failing to reside at a specified address, not keeping in touch with the probation officer or other breaches of licence conditions. A single person may be recalled multiple times.

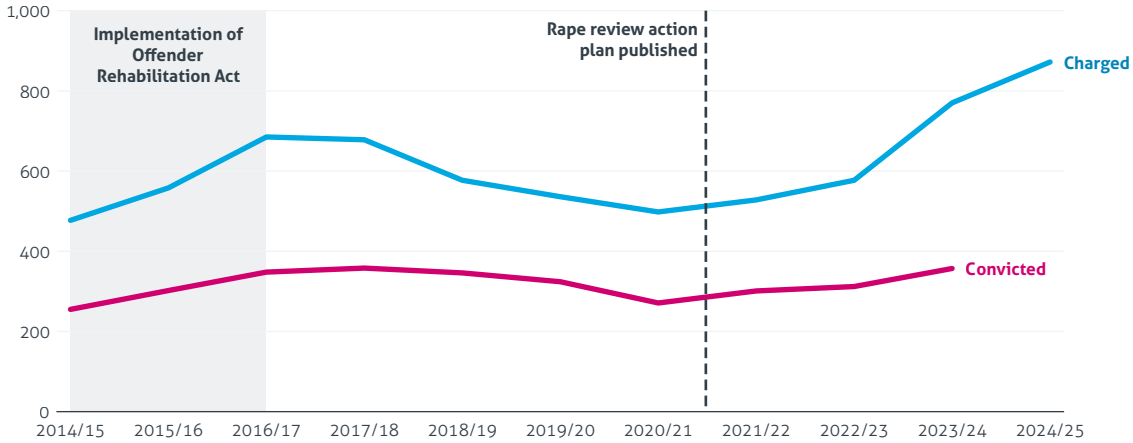
Some of the breaches that lead to administrative recalls may be quite serious, such as the offender contacting the victim of their original offence or breaking a restriction on being around children. But most breaches are for much more minor things like missing an appointment, or for things outside the person's control, such as becoming homeless and so breaching residency requirements.[65] In either case, heavy reliance on recalls suggests a lack of alternative options to impose consequences for breaches. As one probation practitioner we interviewed noted: "Our systems don't support us to use alternatives to recall."

Recalls should, in law, only happen when necessary to protect the public because an offender cannot be managed safely in the community, rather than as a punishment.[66] Administrative recalls impose a strict penalty for behaviour that is not, in itself, criminal, and they disrupt people's accommodation, employment and support structures. This often contributes to a 'revolving door' in and out of prison for offenders with complex and multiple needs. There is little evidence that recalls reduce reoffending, except in the very short term.[67] If they undermine trust between an offender and their probation practitioner, they may even harm rehabilitation.[68,69] The fact that community sentences are generally more effective at promoting rehabilitation than short prison sentences[70] suggests that recalls may be counterproductive in many cases.

* A single person can be recalled multiple times within the same year.

There is also not much to suggest that higher rates of recalls are either improving the protection of the public or a response to greater risks posed by people on probation. As mentioned above, relatively few recalls are because a prison leaver has been charged with a further offence. Yet there has been a rise in recorded 'serious further offences', a specific set of very serious offences, including murder and rape, committed by someone on probation supervision, or within 28 days of their supervision ending. Convictions for a serious further offence rose 10% from 2019/20 to 2023/24, while charges have risen much more steeply in recent years: up 51% from 2022/23 to 2024/25.* Those charged with a serious further offence accounted for 2% of all recalls in 2024/25.

Figure CJS 3.18 **Offenders charged with and convicted of a serious further offence, during or immediately after their probation supervision period, 2014/15–2024/25**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Proven reoffending statistics: October to December 2023' ('Serious further offences annual table' file). Notes: Includes offenders charged or convicted as of 30 September 2025 of a qualifying offence within their probation supervision period or within 28 working days afterwards. Qualifying offences include murder, manslaughter, rape and other serious sexual and violent offences. Offenders may be charged with or convicted of more than one serious further offence. Dates relate to the point of charge. The Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014 substantially increased the number of offenders subject to probation supervision.

But this rise in charges and convictions is unlikely to be due to a sharp rise in actual serious offences committed. The increase in serious further offences is principally driven by rape offences, with convictions for rape rising 57% from 2019/20 to 2023/24. This follows the implementation of the rape review action plan, published in 2021. Since then, rape charges have risen dramatically across the board, with overall prosecutions for rape across the whole population tripling, and convictions doubling, from 2019 to 2025.[71] These figures are not exactly comparable to those in serious further offence statistics, as those are based on when a charge is recorded, rather than when someone is prosecuted or convicted for an offence. But they strongly suggest that improvements in charge and conviction rates, rather than increases in offending, are driving the large rise in serious further offences seen in the data.

* Charges are likely to be a better indicator of increases in serious further offending for recent years, because of the time it takes to secure a conviction for serious crimes.

However, the risk of serious further offences does put a great deal of pressure and anxiety on probation practitioners, who often feel that they will be blamed for anything that goes wrong.[72] This risk-averse approach, coupled with practitioners carrying large caseloads, encourages high rates of recall. Practitioners often feel they do not have the time to dedicate to building a relationship with the people they are supervising, or to do an adequate assessment of their risk level. This can lead to a 'better safe than sorry' approach to recalls in the event of breaches. There has also been a culture shift in probation, focused much more on risk management than on promoting rehabilitation and providing support.[73,74] The emphasis on 'tougher', more restrictive supervision under the Sentencing Act, including through much greater use of tagging, is likely to exacerbate this and may cause recall rates to increase even further.

Electronic monitoring is not working effectively and is unlikely to be able to deliver on the promises ministers have made

The progression model of sentencing relies heavily on electronic monitoring tags for the second stage of a prisoner's sentence, with a presumption that prison leavers will be fitted with some kind of tag, monitoring their location, imposing a curfew or checking for alcohol consumption. The Burnham government also announced in August 2026 that it would impose GPS location monitoring on those convicted of serious sex offences for 12 months after their release, as well as "near real-time electronic monitoring data for probation staff".[75] This amounts to a massive increase in the number of people being tagged, with at least twice as many people on bail or supervised by probation being tagged in 2027 as in March 2026.[76]

In practice, however, it is unlikely that HMPPS will be able to deliver this. The electronic monitoring service is already performing poorly[77] and failing to meet demand.[78] From January to April 2026, fewer than two thirds (62%) of tags were successfully installed within two attempts.[79,*] More than 5,000 people who should be being monitored have not been tagged: 15% of all people with an electronic monitoring order.[80] Almost 1,600 additional people are wearing a tag that has not sent a signal to the monitoring system in the past 14 days, because of a technical fault, a failure to charge the equipment or similar reason.[81]

The MoJ is currently running a pilot where people are fitted with tags before they leave prison, to reduce the number of people who are unmonitored. However, prison and probation staff we spoke to widely viewed this as unrealistic for most prisons.[82]

> **In April 2026, HMPPS identified a significant risk that [electronic monitoring] processes and training may not be ready in time to support the implementation of the earned progression model and associated changes… Expanding a service while key elements are not yet working effectively increases the risk that performance or threats to public protection may worsen.** – National Audit Office[83]

* An attempt to fit a tag could fail for a number of reasons, such as the person not being at the relevant address when they are supposed to be fitted with the tag, refusing to wear it or not being able to (due to an allergy or a tag of the right size not being available).

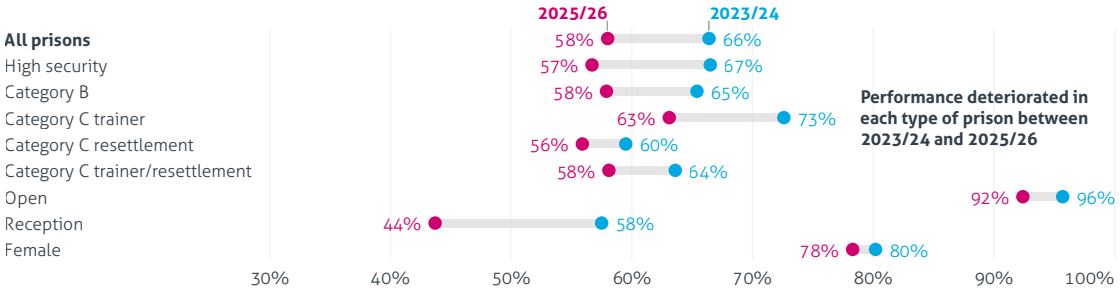
There is little understanding of how the police and probation are responding to breaches when they do happen.[84] Many breach notifications that are sent may not be received. The system is poorly designed, with alerts sent straight to individual practitioners and no means of forwarding or flagging them if a practitioner is on leave.[85] Practitioners also have to proactively check if offenders have breached 'exclusion zones' that they are not allowed to enter, rather than being automatically alerted. All of these problems are only likely to become more acute with such a large increase in the number of people due to be monitored.

Tagging more people is also likely to substantially increase the workload for probation practitioners, when they are already short-staffed and struggling. They need to set appropriate conditions for the tag, adjust them as needed if, for example, the offender moves home or gets a new job, and then respond to any breaches in a proportionate way.

Rehabilitation both in custody and the community is fatally undermined by violence, drugs and a lack of adequate activity and support

Across both prisons and probation, performance problems are seriously undermining efforts at rehabilitation. Prisons are still extremely violent, despite some signs of improvement in early 2026. Purposeful activity – education, employment and rehabilitative courses – has similarly improved slightly in the past year. But it remains far from where it should be, with just 60% of prisoners in the average prison attending at least four activity sessions a week. This is down from 66% in 2023/24, despite the fact that education and employment are some of the best means of reducing reoffending.[86,87] Cuts to prison education budgets under the Starmer government have only worsened the situation.

Figure CJS 3.19 **Prisoners in purposeful activity, public prisons, by prison type, 2023/24 and 2025/26**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Annual Prison Performance Ratings 2023/24 Supplementary Tables' and MoJ, 'Annual Prison Performance Ratings 2025/26 Supplementary Tables'. Notes: Figures include all prisoners in at least part-time purposeful activity, attending at least four activity sessions per week. Chart shows the mean of prisons, weighted by population, within each category. Excludes children in youth custody.

Drug use and serious organised crime are blighting prisons and fuelling criminality both within prisons and in the community.[88] The chief inspector of prisons has repeatedly highlighted the devastating impact this is having on prospects for rehabilitation within prisons as well as prisoner and staff safety.[89] Nor is this contained within the prison walls, with many reports of prisoners' families being coerced into criminal activity or repaying debts incurred in prison, via threats to their loved ones in custody.[90]

Many prisons are losing the fight against criminality. Senior figures in organised crime gangs seem to operate with impunity, building up successful prison networks that make enormous amounts of money... Frustration, boredom and despair are driving the demand for drugs across the estate and yet the prison service has failed to reduce this demand" – HM Chief Inspector of Prisons[91]

Once in the community, the risk-focused, often punitive approach of probation and serious struggles finding accommodation and employment can further hamper rehabilitation. In general, probation practitioners rely on commissioned rehabilitative services, mostly run by the third sector, to support offenders' with their needs, for instance around drugs, alcohol and housing.[92] This may be inevitable given staff shortages in probation, but it further emphasises the role of probation as a punitive and risk-focused organisation, rather than one that is helping offenders get back on their feet and turn their lives around.

There is a serious lack of provision around drug, alcohol and mental health treatment, whether provided by the NHS, the third sector, the local authority or the probation service. Some offenders spend their entire sentence or licence period on a waiting list for support.[93] This hampers efforts to address offending, given 50% of prisoners and 37% of those on community sentences have an identified drug misuse need and around two thirds have an identified mental health need. [94]

There are also major shortages of appropriate housing for prison leavers, including approved premises – intensively supervised residences for people on probation who pose a high or very high risk of harm. Inadequate housing, or no housing at all, is a key factor in many recalls to prison.[95] Those serving short sentences are the least likely to be in settled accommodation three months after release from custody, with fewer than two thirds (63%) of those supervised in stable accommodation, compared to 81% of all supervised prison leavers.

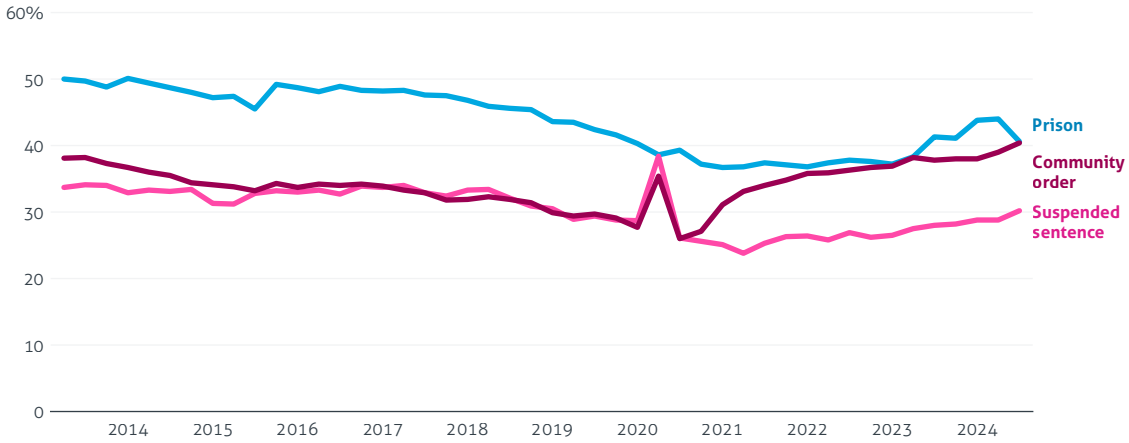
All these factors are harming rehabilitation and may be contributing to a recent rise in reoffending. Reoffending is very difficult to track reliably, but the 'proven reoffending rate' has been rising since late 2020. Reoffending statistics are calculated in three-month cohorts, based on the date the person was released from prison or received a court sentence or caution within a three-month period. The proven reoffending rate tracks the proportion of these offenders who commit another offence within a year of that date, *and* receive a caution or conviction for that offence within 18 months of their original release, sentencing or caution. This means the most recent statistics are for people who were released from prison or received a sentence or caution from July to September 2024.*

* This includes the first tranche of 1,889 people who were released under SDS40, on 10 September 2024 (those serving sentences under five years). These people made up a maximum of 2.3% of the total cohort of 83,652 from June to September. Institute for Government analysis of Ministry of Justice, 'Standard Determinate Sentences 40% (SDS40) Detailed Data, England and Wales', 2026 and Ministry of Justice, 'Proven reoffending statistics: July to September 2024', 2026.

The proven reoffending rate has been rising steadily since late 2020. This will have been strongly influenced by delays in the criminal justice system during the pandemic and by the substantial increase in police charges in recent years. Nonetheless, there does seem to have been a real rise in proven reoffending. For people released or sentenced in 2021/22, there were 1.1 proven reoffences per offender. Among the 2023/24 cohort, that jumped to 1.5 – an increase of 71%, substantially outstripping the total increase in cautions and convictions (11–12%*).[96]

The increase in proven reoffending has been largely driven by rises in reoffending for those on community orders, and to a lesser extent suspended sentences. This suggests that performance failures and inadequate support from probation are having a very real effect on both offenders and the public.

Figure CJS 3.20 **Proven reoffending rate, prison, community and suspended sentences, Q2 2013 to Q3 2024**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of MoJ, 'Proven reoffending statistics: July to September 2024', 2026.
Notes: Reoffending rates measure offences committed within a 12-month follow-up period from that date, which lead to a conviction or caution within 18 months of the original prison release, sentencing or caution. Figures relate to adults. Rates are calculated for three-month cohorts of offenders; dates shown relate to the date someone was released from prison, given a community sentence or receive a caution.

Conclusions

The state of prisons and probation remains extremely poor. Violence and organised crime are rife in prisons, while probation is failing to provide adequate rehabilitation, manage offenders in the community or assess risk to the public appropriately. Reoffending is rising, purposeful activity is falling and both prisons and probation lack the capacity to meet demand. Emergency measures to manage capacity are placing huge strain on other services, particularly the police and housing services. Equally, lack of access to other services such as drug and alcohol and mental health treatment is contributing to ongoing problems in prisons and probation.

And yet, impossibly, this is a success story for the Starmer government. The situation when it came into office in July 2024 was so bad that it is a real achievement to have got this far. The government avoided disaster in the summer and autumn of 2024 and then took serious, politically difficult steps to get the prison population back on a

* This is not an exact comparison, as the data does not cover identical time periods, but it provides a general reference point.

stable trajectory. Ministers introduced policy changes and technological tools to free up probation capacity, at the same time as expanding the workforce. And in the final months of the Starmer government, we saw the benefits of easing pressure on prisons in the form of falling violence and disorder.

However, the Burnham government has a long way to go and there is plenty of room for things to go wrong. It must focus on building capacity and capability in probation, while maintaining enough space in prisons not only to avoid further emergency releases, but also to sustain lower rates of violence and drive more purposeful activity.

Recommendations

- Avoid imposing **unnecessarily restrictive and punitive licence conditions** on people on probation, to **encourage trusted relationships** with probation supervisors and reduce administrative recalls.

- **Increase the number of probation practitioners** at a steady pace, avoiding large staff influxes (and likely exits) as far as possible.

- Provide probation delivery units with **more flexibility to hire or commission specialist services**, such as housing and mental health advisers, to provide timely access to specialist support. This could be done using some of the budget currently allocated to increase probation capacity and improve performance.

- **Reintroduce home detention** as a first-line means of managing the prison population, should it become necessary.

- Develop a **sentencing model that is transparent and understandable** for the public and victims, with an explicit custodial period. For prison sentences, this should **set out time in prison and time supervised in the community**. Avoid the use of licence periods with no supervision.

- Emphasise **purposeful activity in prisons**, to try to drive down violence, self-harm and drug use.

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