# Britain’s Crown Court backlog forces trials into 2029 amid systemic crisis



Britain's court system faces an unprecedented crisis, with trials now scheduled as far ahead as 2029, a situation reflecting a broader malaise within the criminal justice framework. This alarming reality comes in the wake of rising backlogs, which have reached over 75,000 cases in the Crown Court alone. These delays, described as "jaw-dropping" by legal advocates, raise significant concerns about justice being served fairly and in a timely manner.

The first trial set for 2029 involves a South London mother contesting possession of cannabis, while another trial concerning alleged vehicle theft is also on the docket for that bleak January. Stephen Nelson, the barrister involved, emphasises the straightforward nature of these cases and highlights the distress borne by clients awaiting their day in court. He warns that one of his clients, suffering from poor health, may not survive to see the trial, underscoring the very human stakes involved in these legal delays.

The Ministry of Justice acknowledges that “justice delayed is justice denied.” Yet, despite this recognition, the backlog continues to burgeon. A recent report from the National Audit Office revealed that the government's target to trim the backlog to 53,000 by 2025 is now deemed unachievable. Contributing factors include strikes by barristers, protracted complexities surrounding sexual offences, and logistical challenges in moving prisoners. The ongoing crisis reflects a systemic failure within the justice system, with the number of outstanding Crown Court cases doubling over recent years.

Mary Prior KC, chair of the Criminal Bar Association, stresses the profound implications of such lengthy delays, noting that victims, witnesses, and defendants are left in limbo, often unable to recall critical details after such long spans. Her observations echo a broader sentiment echoed throughout the legal community, that the inefficiencies plague all aspects of the system. Delays can stretch to six years from the offence to trial for some cases, making the entire process feel surreal and damaging.

The government’s efforts to mitigate these issues have so far been insufficient. Although Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced an increase in court sitting days to tackle this backlog, the challenge remains daunting. It was disclosed that over 5,000 trials were pulled from court lists in the last quarter of 2024 alone due to a lack of available judges, prosecutors, or defence counsel. Furthermore, the logistic fiasco regarding prisoner transport also complicates matters, with increasing numbers of trials being adjourned at the last minute.

Legal professionals are calling for considerable investment in the justice sector, arguing that the current conditions amount to an emergency. Leaders in the legal community are demanding at least £2.5 billion in additional funding annually to restore order and efficiency to a faltering system. With voters increasingly aware of these challenges, especially in the wake of public scandals like the Post Office debacle, there is a growing insistence that political leaders must take the issue seriously and advocate for structural reforms.

Retired judge Sir Brian Leveson is conducting a critical review intended to recommend major reforms to the court system. However, many legal experts argue that changes are needed immediately, with actions such as the proposed restriction of jury trials facing resistance from the public and legal practitioners alike.

Amidst these discussions, voices within the Ministry of Justice claim awareness of the prevailing issues concerning trial delays and an understanding of the need for reform. However, despite a commitment to funding and expanding court capabilities, the actual bottlenecks remain unresolved. The hope for significant changes looms faint, as the backlog only continues to increase, leaving countless individuals in a protracted state of uncertainty. The question looms: How many more people must experience the sense of suspended justice before the necessary reforms are enacted?

The prospect, then, of witnessing a decline in legal professionals—particularly with a significant percentage expressing intentions to exit the field—raises alarm bells not just for the future of justice, but for the very fabric of the British legal system itself. Without urgent, well-coordinated investment and reform, the path to resolution seems as distant as ever.

**Reference Map:**

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
2. Paragraph 4
3. Paragraph 3
4. Paragraph 5
5. Paragraph 5
6. Paragraph 1, 2, 4
7. Paragraph 4

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/court-trials-delays-backlog-gauke-review-b2754628.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/7fc3cd0a-65c8-493a-9aa0-cce0c38b679e> - The UK's Crown Court backlog has reached a record high, with over 67,000 cases pending by the end of 2023. The National Audit Office (NAO) has deemed the government's target to reduce this backlog to 53,000 by 2025 unachievable. Factors contributing to the delays include a barristers' strike, complexities in rape cases, and logistical issues in transporting prisoners. The NAO criticized the lack of adequate investment in the criminal justice system, which has also led to prison overcrowding. Despite efforts by the Ministry of Justice to expand court capacity and recruit more judges, more coordinated and timely actions are needed. The situation exacerbates distress for victims and witnesses and has become a significant electoral issue. The government's measures, including courtroom expansions and a significant prison-building program, are yet to yield the desired reduction in backlog.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/c20e8c09-0cd4-4929-8549-f224bab7cf93> - As the UK prepares for upcoming elections, the legal community is urging political leaders to prioritize and invest in the justice system, highlighting its deteriorating state due to budget cuts. Nick Emmerson, president of the Law Society, and Sam Townend KC, chair of the Bar Council, are advocating for substantial increases in funding to address the "emergency" conditions within prisons and courts. They stress the broader public's concern for justice, referencing the widespread reaction to the Post Office scandal, and argue that there are "votes in justice" that can be gained by addressing these issues. The Bar Council is calling for an additional £2.5bn per year, pointing out significant delays and backlogs in crown courts, and a reduction in legal aid spending by 40 percent, all contributing to delays and injustices. Emmerson and Townend emphasize the importance of restoring and properly funding the justice system to maintain the UK's global reputation for legal excellence and to address systemic problems affecting defendants, victims, and the overall legal infrastructure.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/e1118f5d-8333-4261-be24-e8372191953e> - The English criminal justice system is facing severe delays, with court backlogs reaching record levels. Snaresbrook Crown Court, for example, is scheduling trials for 2026, even for high-priority cases. The number of outstanding Crown Court cases doubled to nearly 68,000 by the end of 2023. Factors contributing to the crisis include budget cuts, a shortage of barristers, and prison overcrowding. The government’s inability to anticipate rises in sexual offence prosecutions and adapt post-pandemic conditions exacerbates the delays. Current solutions like Nightingale courts are costly and insufficient. Proposals to alleviate pressures, such as restricting jury trials, face strong resistance. The situation is further compounded by logistical issues, like the transportation of prisoners. Significant investment is essential to restore timely justice and improve court operations.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2024/dec/06/crisis-courts-england-wales-how-did-we-get-here> - The English criminal justice system is facing severe delays, with court backlogs reaching record levels. Snaresbrook Crown Court, for example, is scheduling trials for 2026, even for high-priority cases. The number of outstanding Crown Court cases doubled to nearly 68,000 by the end of 2023. Factors contributing to the crisis include budget cuts, a shortage of barristers, and prison overcrowding. The government’s inability to anticipate rises in sexual offence prosecutions and adapt post-pandemic conditions exacerbates the delays. Current solutions like Nightingale courts are costly and insufficient. Proposals to alleviate pressures, such as restricting jury trials, face strong resistance. The situation is further compounded by logistical issues, like the transportation of prisoners. Significant investment is essential to restore timely justice and improve court operations.
6. <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/ambition-to-reduce-crown-court-backlog-no-longer-achievable/> - The Ministry of Justice’s ambition to reduce the Crown Court backlog of 67,284 cases to 53,000 by March 2025 is no longer achievable, according to the latest National Audit Office (NAO) report. The NAO reports that in 2023, the remand population in prison went over 16,000 – the highest in 50 years – with around two-thirds awaiting trial. The report found over a quarter (26%) of the backlog cases have been waiting a year or more to be heard, and the number of cases waiting for two years or more is 6,049. Delays are exacerbating the impact on victims and witnesses, as well as increasing the risk of cases collapsing.
7. <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/contact-or-visit-us/press-office/press-releases/record-crown-court-backlog-as-long-wait-for-justice-continues> - Latest figures released today (12 October) show the Crown Court backlog has hit a new record high of more than 65,000 cases. The HM Courts and Tribunals Service data reveals: 353,700 outstanding cases in the magistrates’ courts in August this year, up from 343,842 in August 2022; Crown Court cases also increased to 65,004 in August this year (60,580 in August 2022) which makes the government target of reducing the backlog to 53,000 by March 2025 appear increasingly unrealistic. “The backlogs in our courts are actually getting larger instead of reducing as the crisis in our criminal justice system worsens,” said Law Society of England and Wales president Nick Emmerson. “Our prisons are so overcrowded that judges are reportedly being asked to delay sentencing convicted criminals. Our courts are so overwhelmed with cases that victims and defendants are having to wait years for cases to come to trial. There aren’t enough judges and lawyers to handle the number of cases in the system, and the court estate is crumbling. After decades of underfunding and neglect, the only answer is urgent investment across the whole criminal justice system, otherwise the downward spiral will only continue.