

Case Processing Time for Criminal Cases dealt with at Courts in Northern Ireland 2020-21

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1 Key Findings

This bulletin presents data on the average (measured as the median) case processing time for criminal cases dealt with in the Crown and magistrates' courts in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 and refers to the time from which the offence was reported to, or detected by, the police. Completion of cases in 2020/21 was severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic; this is reflected in the numbers recorded in this bulletin.

Average is measured as the median number of days taken, i.e., the number of days at which 50% of cases have been completed.

Overall

- Prior to the pandemic, the time taken for cases to be completed had been showing a general improvement. The pandemic however, has impacted on both the levels of court business which could be conducted and on other parts of the justice system, including on the issue of summons. This has meant that, for a large part of 2020/21, cases were not able to proceed through the system at a rate they might otherwise have done.

- The average time taken for a case to be dealt with, at **all courts**, was 193 days, an increase of 29.5% from the previous year (149 days) and the highest figure recorded in the last five years.

Crown Court

- In 2020/21 the average time taken for a charge case to be dealt with at Crown court was 470 days, an increase of 14.6% from 2019/20 (410 days).
- The average time taken for a summons case to be dealt with at Crown court was 939 days, an increase of 9.1% from 2019/20 (861 days).

Adult Magistrates' Courts

- In 2020/21 the average time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts**, was 122 days, an increase of 69.4% from the previous year (72 days).
- The average time taken for a **summons case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts**, was 212 days, an increase of 19.1% from 178 days in 2019/20.

Youth Magistrates' Courts

- In 2020/21 the average time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **youth magistrates' courts**, was 187 days, an increase of 59.8% from 2019/20 (117 days).
- The average time taken for a **summons case** to be dealt with at **youth magistrates' courts**, was 326 days, an increase of 34.7% from the 242 days taken in 2019/20.

Processing Times by Offence Category

- In 2020/21 the average time taken to complete cases where the main offence was a motoring one was 153 days. The comparative figure for sexual offences was 581 days.

2 Introduction

About This Report

The efficiency of the criminal justice system is important for victims and witnesses, and their families and communities, in terms of building confidence. Early resolution of cases can also help offenders understand the implications of their actions. Speeding up the criminal justice system therefore continues to be a priority for the Department of Justice (DoJ). The intention of this publication is to show the impact on performance over time of key 'speeding up justice' initiatives put in place through law reform and through administrative and practice improvements. It aims to provide an overview of the time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, from the date that case began its journey through the criminal justice system, based on a start point of the date the offence was reported to, or detected by, the police.

This bulletin is produced in accordance with the pillars and principles set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics. It presents data on the average case processing time for criminal cases dealt with in the Crown and magistrates'

courts (both adult and youth) in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. These two courts have separate remits and hear particular types of cases. Generally speaking, the Crown Court hears more serious, high-level and complex cases and the magistrates' courts hear lower level cases. Consequently, the time taken for a case in the Crown Court is often longer than that seen in the magistrates' courts. As well as analysis in relation to the type of court in which the case was dealt with (Crown Court, adult magistrates' or youth magistrates' courts) information in relation to case type (charge or summons case) is also provided.

Details of data coverage, quality and methodology are detailed in Appendix 1. Data in all tables and charts in the bulletin, along with supplementary data, are available from the DoJ website in the accompanying [spreadsheet](#).

The next update, covering the 12 months to 31 March 2022, will be published in September 2022. A full [publication schedule](#) is available on the DoJ website.

3 Findings

3.1 Number of Cases

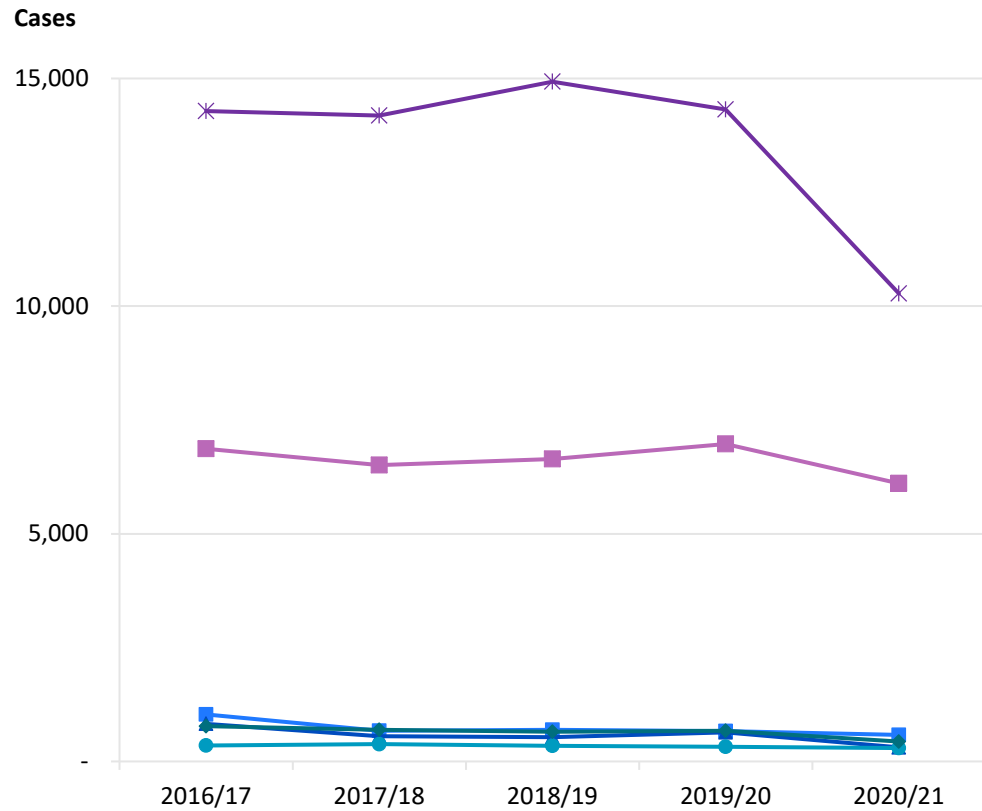
Details of cases included in the calculations in this bulletin are outlined in the methodological section of Appendix 1. In summary, they include cases prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) on behalf of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) which were resolved at court and did not result in an out of court disposal and where there was complete relevant information available. Cases resulting from a breach of a previous court order are not included.

In 2020/21 the number of overall cases completed (which were included in the dataset) was 18,006, a decrease of 23.7% from the total in 2019/20 (23,585). The completion of cases during the current year was affected by lockdowns and other restrictions which were introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. At Crown Court, there were 893 cases completed, a 31.7% decrease on the total completed in 2019/20 and the lowest figure recorded in the last five years.

In 2020/21 the number of charge cases completed (6,106) at adult magistrates' courts decreased by 12.4% compared to the previous year (6,971); the number of summons cases completed (10,276) fell by 28.2% (14,316 cases in 2019/20). Both of these respective totals in 2020/21 were the lowest recorded in the last five years.

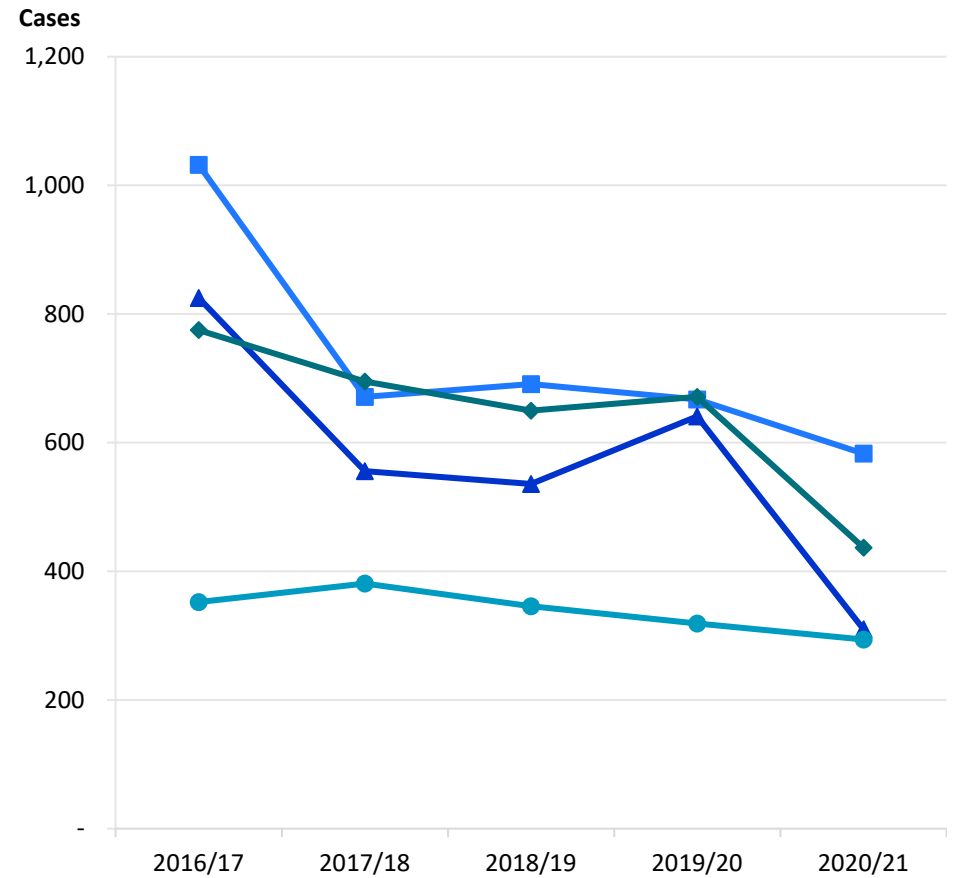
At 294, the number of charge cases at youth magistrates' courts in 2020/21 was 7.8% less than the same figure in 2019/20 (319) and the lowest total recorded for this type of case in the last 5 years. The number of summons cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts (437) decreased by 34.9% compared to the previous year (671). This most recent figure is also the lowest in the last 5 years for this type of case (Figures 1a and 1b, Tables 1 - 8 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 1a: Number of Included Cases by Court Type, 2016/17 – 2020/21



- Crown Court Charged
- ▲ Crown Court Summonsed
- Adult Charged
- ✱ Adult Summonsed
- Youth Charged
- ◆ Youth Summonsed

Figure 1b: Number of Included Crown Court and Youth Magistrates' Courts Cases by Court Type, 2016/17 – 2020/21



- Crown Court Charged
- ▲ Crown Court Summonsed
- Youth Charged
- ◆ Youth Summonsed

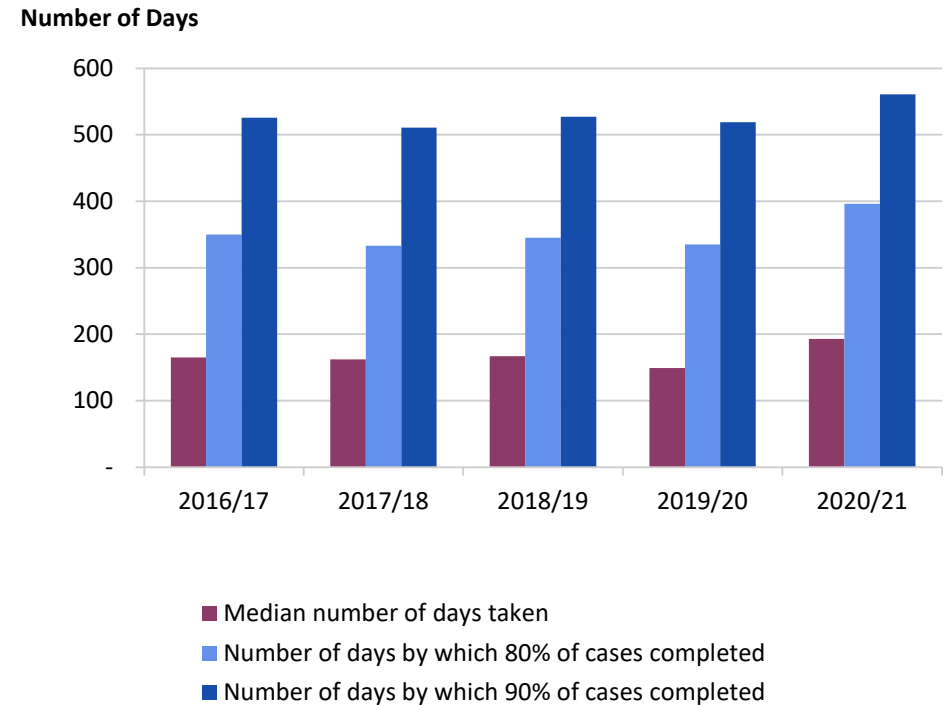
3.2 All Cases – Time Taken

Some complex cases take a long time to complete and, because of this, it is useful to show not just an average processing time, but the time taken to process the bulk of cases. In this report, the length of time in which 80% and 90% of cases are completed is also reported.

In 2020/21 the average (median) time taken for a case to be dealt with at court from the date the offence was reported, in relation to all courts was 193 days. This is an increase of 29.5% from the median of 149 days taken in 2019/20 and is the highest median time recorded in the last 5 years.

In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2020/21, was 396 days. This is an increase of 18.2% from 2019/20 (335 days). The figure of 561 days, in relation to the time by which 90% of cases were completed, was 8.1% higher than that recorded in the previous year (Figure 2, Table 1 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 2: Time taken for all cases from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2016/17 – 2020/21



3.3 Crown Court Cases – Time Taken

In 2020/21 the median time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **Crown court** was 470 days, an increase of 14.6% from 2019/20 (410 days) but still 1.3% lower than the figure recorded in 2016/17 (476 days), the highest in the recent series. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2020/21 was 699 days, an increase of 15.9% from 2019/20. The figure of 905 days, in relation to the time by which 90% of cases were completed, was 15.6% higher than that recorded in 2019/20 and was the highest recorded in the last five years (Figure 3, Table 2 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Of all case types, **summons cases** completed at **Crown Court** have taken the longest time period in each of the last five years. In 2020/21 the median time was 939 days, an increase of 9.1% from the previous year (861 days), and the highest median value recorded for this type of case in the past five years. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2020/21 was 1,389 days, again the highest period of time recorded for this type of case in the past five years, and an increase of 6.4% from 2019/20 (Figure 4, Table 3 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 3: Time taken for charge cases dealt with at Crown Court, from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2016/17 – 2020/21

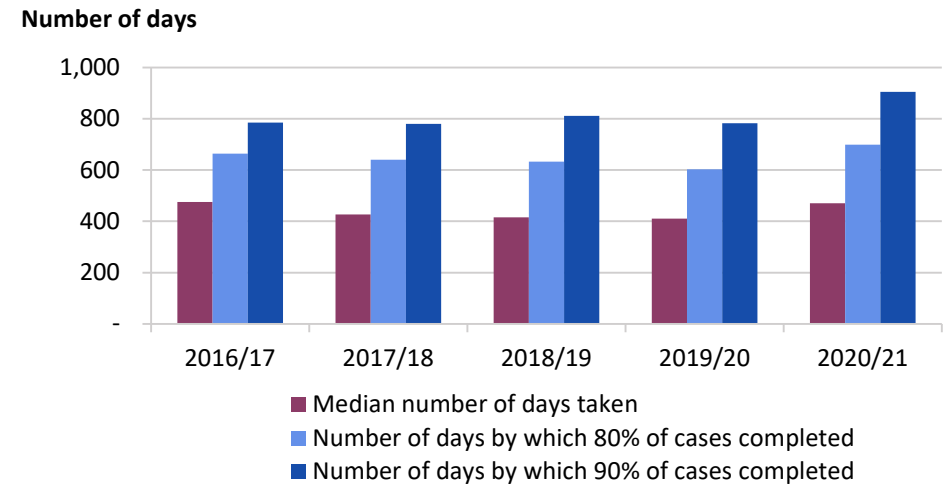
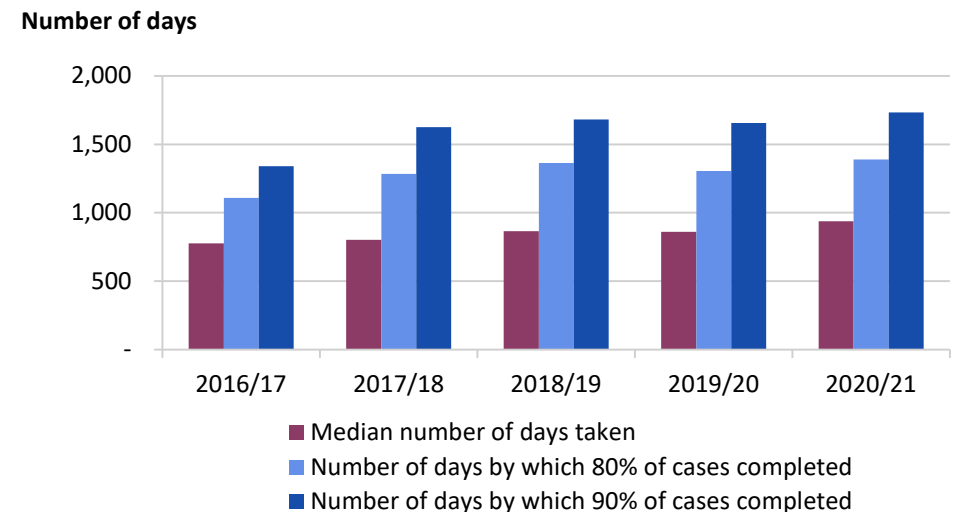


Figure 4: Time taken for summons cases dealt with at Crown Court from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2016/17 – 2020/21



3.4 Magistrates' Adult Courts – Time Taken

In 2020/21 the median time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts** from the date the offence was reported was 122 days, an increase of 69.4% from 2019/20 and the highest figure recorded in the last five years. The number of days taken in 2020/21 by which 80% of cases were completed was 266 days, the highest value recorded for this type of case in the past five years and an increase of 71.6% from the previous year. Similarly, the number of days by which 90% of cases were completed in 2020/21 (360 days) was up 62.2% from the figure recorded in 2019/20, (Figure 5, Table 4 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

In 2020/21 the median time taken for a **summons case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts** was 212 days, an increase of 19.1% from 2019/20 and the highest median time recorded for this type of case in the last five years. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2020/21 was 423 days, an increase of 18.5% from 2019/20. The number of days by which 90% of cases were completed was 588 days, an increase of 11.6% from the figure recorded in 2019/20 (Figure 6, Table 5 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 5: Time taken for all cases for charge cases completed at adult magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2016/17 – 2020/21

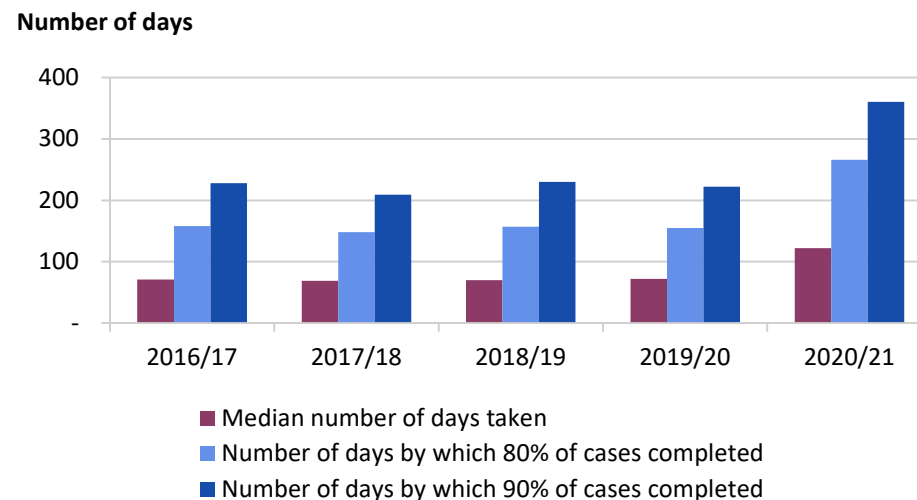
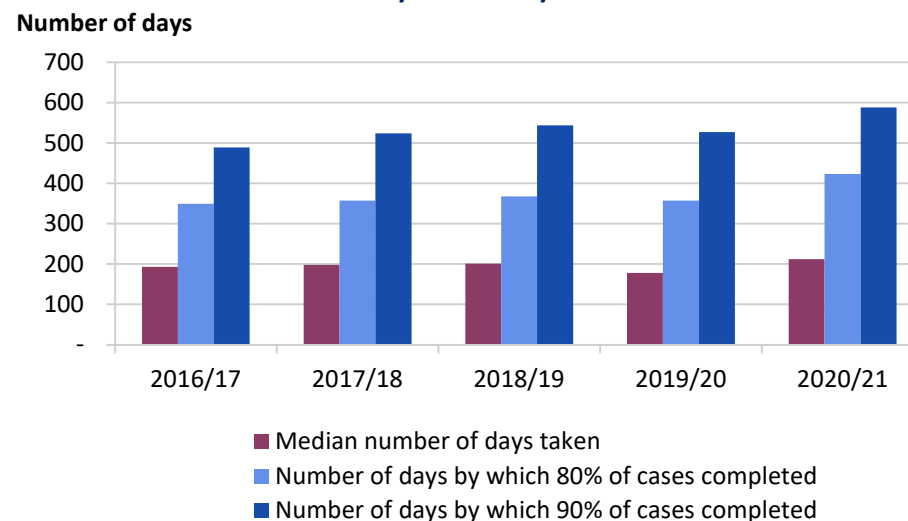


Figure 6: Time taken for summons cases completed at adult magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2016/17 – 2020/21



3.5 Magistrates' Youth Courts – Time Taken

In 2020/21 the median time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **youth magistrates' courts**, was 187 days, an increase of 59.8% from the previous year (117 days) and the highest recorded in the last five years. Similarly, 80% of cases were completed, within 332 days in 2020/21, an increase of 40.7% from the previous year, and the highest recorded for this type of case in the last five years (Figure 7, Table 6 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

The median time taken for a **summons case** to be dealt with at **youth magistrates' courts**, was 326 days in 2020/21, an increase of 34.7% from 2019/20 and the highest median value recorded for this type of case in the last five years. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken was 513 days in 2020/21, up 18.5% from that recorded for this type of case in 2019/20 (Figure 8, Table 7 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 7: Time taken for charge cases completed at youth magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2016/17 – 2020/21

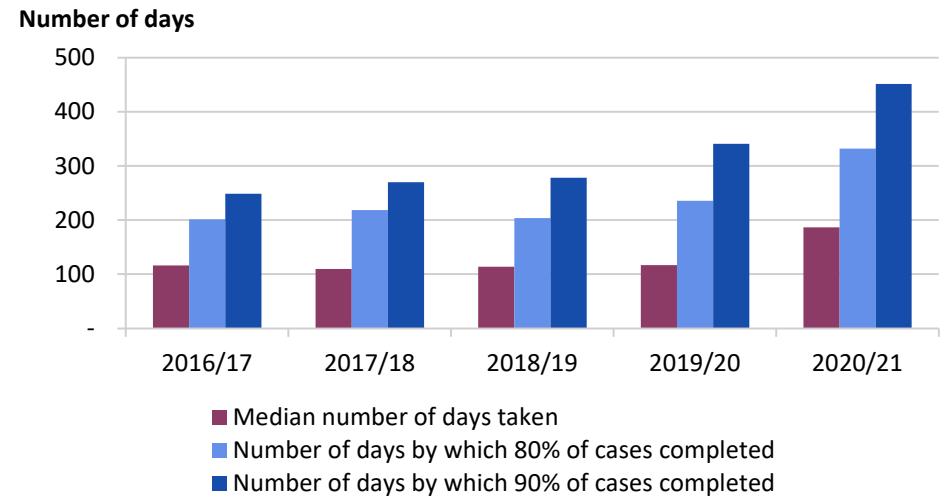
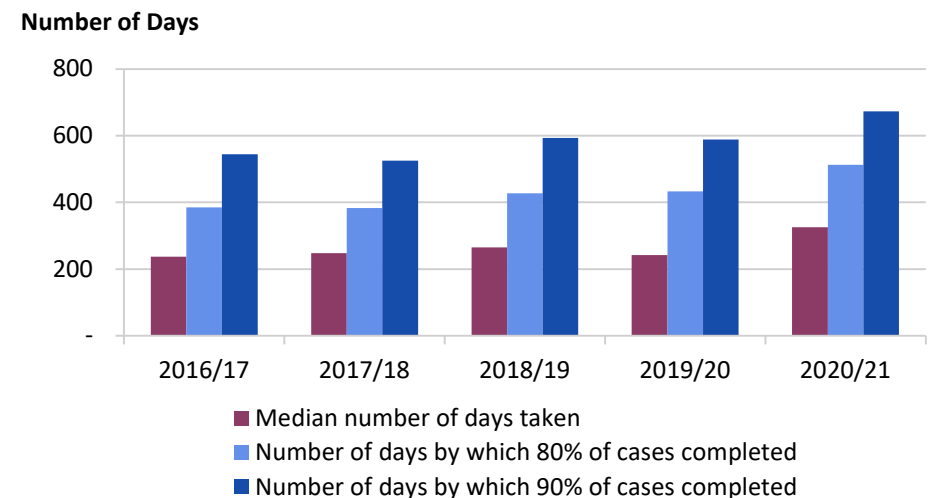


Figure 8: Time taken for summons cases completed at youth magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2016/17 – 2020/21



3.6 Offence Category – Time Taken

In 2020/21 the median time taken for cases where the main offence was sexual was 581 days, the longest for any of the offence categories. This is a decrease of 16.8% on the figure for 2019/20 and the lowest median figure, for this type of case, recorded in the last five years. Cases where the main offence category was motoring (153 days) or public order (174 days) had the shortest average times taken, from offence reported to disposal at court. Both of these were, however, the highest median values for these types of cases recorded in any of the last five years (Table 8 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

When considering average time taken for cases to complete however, it should be borne in mind that different types of cases may, by their nature, be more likely to be heard in either the Crown Court, or a magistrates' court. It may be more appropriate therefore to make comparisons in relation to offence categories across time, rather than to compare times taken for cases falling into one offence category with another.

4 Appendix 1 - Methodology and Counting Rules

Introduction

The criminal justice system is designed to deliver appropriate disposals when a defendant has been found guilty for an offence. Diversion and the operation of discretion can help ensure that lower level offending is subject to early and proportionate actions. At this early stage, many cases are diverted from the more formal justice system into an out of court disposal option, for reasons of public policy or for the good of the individual or broader public.

For cases that do proceed to prosecution at court, there are two main courts in Northern Ireland—the Crown Court and magistrates’ courts (both adult and youth). As the division of cases between the two types of courts depends primarily on the nature of the offences to be tried and the potential length of sentence which may be imposed, the time taken for a case in the Crown Court may be longer than that seen in magistrates’ courts.

Further, there are additional cases that may proceed to prosecution but do not reach the end of the full court process, due either to lack of sufficient evidence or because the charge is withdrawn.

Cases may be brought to court by way of summons or charge and defendants may end up having their case heard in various types of court. However, despite differences in the types of court, the types of offences and the method by which a defendant is brought to court, the process through which a case proceeds from offence reported to case dealt with is generally the same (detailed below in the figure below).



The offence is first reported to the police, or detected by the police, (offence reported), after which an investigation is conducted. Subject to the outcome of that investigation, the police may charge a suspect, or inform the suspect that they are to be reported (charged/informed) to the PPS, who will review the case and take a decision as to whether or not to instigate a prosecution.

If a decision is made to prosecute by way of a charge sheet, the police charge the suspect, who has been arrested, and the PPS review the charge before the first court appearance to make sure there is enough evidence at that stage for the defendant to be prosecuted. The defendant will either be:

- held in police custody overnight and produced at the first available court, where the court will then consider the issue of bail; or
- released on police bail to appear before court on a stated date within 28 days from the charge.

If the case is commenced by way of a summons, this is issued by either the PPS or a third party (i.e. a government department) and is served on the defendant either by post or in person. The defendant will be required to go to court on the date stated on the summons.

When the police have collected enough evidence, a case file will be prepared and submitted to the PPS (PPS submission). The PPS then must apply the test for prosecution and decide whether to prosecute (PPS decision). If the PPS

decides to prosecute, a first court date will be set (first court appearance) and the case will proceed through the court as normal with the examination of evidence and witnesses and opportunities for both the prosecution and defence to make their cases. The process concludes when a decision is made by the court. A case is dealt with in court when a defendant is either acquitted, or if the defendant is convicted, when a sentence has been handed down (court disposal).

It is important to note however, that cases instigated by way of police charge (rather than reported to PPS), will ordinarily appear in court prior to PPS taking a prosecution decision. In general, the purpose of such pre-prosecution decision hearings is to determine issues such as bail or remand. For the purpose of this bulletin therefore, in cases brought before the court by way of charge, the date of the first court appearance relates to the first occasion on which the case appears in court after the PPS has taken a decision to prosecute. In effect therefore, the data ignores court appearances which occur before a prosecution decision is taken. The Department has adopted this approach, with the agreement of criminal justice partners, in order to provide a better basis for comparing charge cases with reported.

What counts as a case?

The figures reported in this bulletin relate to cases dealt with at court in the year specified, where the case was prosecuted by the PPS on behalf of PSNI, Harbour Police, Airport Constabulary or the National Crime Agency (NCA).

For the purposes of the statistics presented in this publication, a case may be considered to commence when an offence is first reported to, or detected by, the PSNI, Harbour Police, Airport Constabulary or the NCA. The case then proceeds through the various stages of the criminal justice system until it is considered dealt with, as a result of a prosecution at court. The time period measured therefore, is the number of calendar days from Offence Reported Date to Courts Disposal Date, for cases dealt with at courts in the 12 months ending in the year specified in the tables. Court recess dates are not taken into account.

Cases dealt with through an out of court disposal, or which do not reach the end of the full court process for the reasons listed above, do not go through the standard stages of the court system and, as such, are not directly comparable with cases that have gone through the judicial system. They are therefore **excluded** from the dataset. Similarly, cases relating to breaches of court orders previously imposed are **excluded** from the dataset, as they relate to a court order made in relation to a previous offence and have not

proceeded through the various stages in the criminal justice process in the same way that cases relating to other offences may have.

Due to the exclusions outlined above, the figures in this publication, therefore, should not be considered as the total number of cases dealt with in courts in the years concerned, rather, only as the number of cases in the dataset upon which the calculations derived for this publication are based. Overall case volumes dealt with by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service may be sourced on the [NICTS statistics bulletins page](#).

The court processing time dataset is based on the principal offence (main offence) at conviction or disposal. The principal offence counted is normally the one that draws the most severe disposal at conviction or on completion of a case. Offences for which a defendant is convicted are not necessarily the same as those for which the defendant was initially proceeded against, as charges may be amended during the course of a case. The decision recorded is that reached by the court and takes no account of any subsequent appeal to a higher court. The basis for selection of the principal offence is laid down in rules issued by the Home Office; the DoJ has developed a [methodology](#) applicable to Northern Ireland based on these.

Data source and coverage

The statistics are produced using administrative data sourced from the Causeway Data Sharing Mechanism (DSM1). They were extracted primarily based on records contained on the Criminal Records Viewer (CRV), held on Causeway. CRV utilises data which originated in the PSNI, PPS and from Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. Causeway is an interconnected information system, launched as a joint undertaking by the Criminal Justice Organisations in Northern Ireland.

Full details of data relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, coherence, user need, cost and confidentiality is available in the [accompanying background quality](#) report. Details of the data quality checks and processes that DoJ has in place are available in the [Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\)](#) document on the DoJ website.

Interpreting the data

Figures reported relate primarily to the average time taken, from Offence Reported Date to Courts Disposal Date. The form of average reported on in this bulletin is the median, or the value below which 50 per cent of cases were completed. Figures for the time taken to deal with cases at the 80th and 90th percentiles (the time taken for 80% and 90% of cases to be dealt with respectively) are also reported.

Initial data exploration identified that, when there are a few cases that have taken a long time to complete, measurement of the mean time taken for cases to be processed, may be affected by a distribution curve with a long tail, i.e. by a small number of cases that have taken an inordinately long time. Therefore, given the distribution of cases in relation to the time taken to complete them, the median, rather than the mean, is the best way to measure the midpoint in the series and thus to remove any possible skew caused by cases that may, for various reasons, take an inordinately long time to process or complete. For example, the 'average' number of days taken to complete a case in 2020/21, when measured using the median, was 193 days compared to 268 days when measured using the mean. This latter figure however, equates to the 65th percentile in terms of time taken for a case to be completed (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Distribution curve of cases by days taken from offence reported date to case dealt with at court date, 2020/21

