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Analytical Services Group
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Provisional Figures

C Darragh

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This bulletin is available on the Internet at:

[Northern Ireland Court Service Statistical Publications](#)

Executive Summary

This report covers data from January to March 2021, so court activity during this period has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Figures published show that the impact of COVID-19 is clear to see. It is expected that the limited operation of the criminal courts during the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have an impact on many of the published figures in this and future releases.

Administrative case management reviews were introduced by the Lord Chief Justice as part of the coronavirus contingency arrangements. This has resulted in Judges investing significant time reviewing cases and making directions or orders administratively (where appropriate), and this has continued even as courts have resumed to support business recovery. This extra time is not recorded on the courts operating system (ICOS), and therefore is not reflected within the sittings times published within this report.

- This bulletin provides information on throughput at Crown Courts in Northern Ireland during the period January to March 2021 and commentary on trends observed for this quarter in each year from 2012. On 31st October 2016, a single County Court Division called 'The County Court of Northern Ireland' replaced the seven existing County Court Divisions. As a consequence of this change, data contained in the Crown Court Bulletin is now disaggregated solely by Court Office (Processing Office). During the period January to March 2021:
- There were 445 Crown cases received during January to March 2021 (Table 1). This was a 38% increase on the 322 received during January to March 2020. The number of cases disposed has decreased by 13%, from 397 during January to March 2020, to 346 for the same period in 2021 (Table 2).
- The average time from committal to hearing for January to March 2021 was 117 days, compared with 111 days for the same period in 2020. The average time from conviction to disposal was 48 days, compared with 62 days for the equivalent period in 2020. The average waiting times for defendants disposed in the January to March quarter over the last ten years is outlined in Figure 2.
- County Court Judges disposed of 99% of defendants (412) and during the same quarter last year they disposed of 97% (481) defendants. 16% of defendants were charged solely with drug offences, while 44% of defendants had a combination of charges. During the same period last year 11% of defendants were charged solely with drug offences, and 44% of defendants had a combination of charges. The charge types for defendants disposed during January to March 2021 are outlined in Figure 3.
- Of the 416 defendants disposed during January to March 2021, 129 (31%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 172 (35%) during January to March 2020.
- In total there were 513 Crown Court sittings for January to March 2021 compared with 676 for January to March 2020 (a decrease of 24%), with a total time of 1,177 hours sat compared with 1,611 hours sat during the same period last year.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Crown Court has exclusive jurisdiction to try offences charged on indictment. Offences tried on indictment are more serious offences. The Lord Chief Justice is President of the Crown Court and the Lords Justices of Appeal, High Court Judges and county court judges all sit in the Crown Court.

Trial on indictment in the Crown Court follows after the accused has been returned for trial at committal proceedings in a magistrates' court. The Public Prosecution Service is responsible for preparing a formal document called an indictment, stating the charges which the accused will face. The matters are then tried before a judge sitting with a jury.

The Crown Court normally sits at seven different venues throughout Northern Ireland and the trial of non-scheduled offences takes place at the sitting of the Crown Court determined by the District Judge who committed the accused. This is usually the Crown Court acting for the county court division in which the offence is alleged to have been committed.

Appeal from the Crown Court is to the Court of Appeal. If a person wishes to appeal against conviction on a question of fact, the permission of either the Crown Court Judge or the Court of Appeal is required. To appeal against sentence he or she needs the leave of the Court of Appeal.

All persons convicted of a scheduled offence tried on indictment can appeal against conviction to the Court of Appeal on any grounds and without leave. This automatic right of appeal is a safeguard built into the system because in these cases there is no jury.

The prosecution has no right to appeal against the acquittal of a defendant who has been tried on indictment. The Attorney-General can refer a point of law to the Court of Appeal for its opinion, but even if the Court of Appeal considers that the trial judge made an error of law resulting in an acquittal, the acquittal still stands. The reference and subsequent ruling is useful in guiding the prosecution of future trials.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Data sources

Data contained in the Tables are inputted onto the Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS). This system was implemented across the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) over a two year period from 2005 to 2007. While ICOS was introduced in the Crown Court during 2006, data derived from ICOS has been used as the source for official government statistics since 2007, when the implementation of ICOS across all court tiers was completed. ICOS is a live operating system used in each court tier to process every part of court business, from receipt of payments through to the production of final orders made. The data are input into this system on a daily basis by court clerks, and this information is checked and confirmed by another member of staff to ensure the data entries are correct.

2.2 Methodology for generating data

Statisticians based within the NICTS take a download of Crown Court information from ICOS on a monthly basis. The information is downloaded using a package called SharePoint which extracts all the relevant data from ICOS into text files which are refreshed with up to date information each weekend. The text files are downloaded onto a secure internal facility that only specified statistical personnel have access to. The data contained in the files are identified only by numbers and names and addresses are not held. These statistical files are not transmitted outside the NICTS statistical team. The statisticians based in the NICTS then import these data into the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). SPSS is then used to perform extensive data validations to identify potential errors in the data and to ensure the data are reliable and robust.

2.3 Baseline and Time period

Data contained within this bulletin relates to the current calendar year 2021. The time series for this information dates back to 2007 however, within this publication, comparisons of trends are viewed over a 10 year period.

2.4 Frequency of Publication

This bulletin is published on a quarterly basis. The next bulletin will cover the second quarter of 2021 and will be published on 6th August 2021.

2.5 Data quality and validation

Statisticians based in the NICTS have invested significant time and effort creating an extensive computer programme within SPSS to validate the information downloaded from ICOS. The programme includes over 100 checks against downloaded Crown Court data to: (i) check consistency over time and between variables; (ii) reliability of data using logic checks; (iii) checking that variables fall within accepted ranges; and (iv) checking with the

ICOS Support Team in the event of any major discrepancies that have occurred since the last download. The validation program produces user friendly tables highlighting the potential problems which are circulated to each county court venue as a validation report.

Each court division has a Case Progression Officer who is responsible for: monitoring accuracy levels on ICOS, by carrying out sample checks on data entry and court resulting; ensuring all validations on ICOS and manual statistics returns are completed in a timely manner; providing advice and identifying training needs; monitoring the confirmation of ICOS criminal court resulting, including the inputting of adjournment codes; and promoting awareness of the impact error can have, its wide ranging consequences and the negative impact on the reliability of management information.

The Case Progression Officer is given a two week period from the date the validation report issues until all records are amended on ICOS. This ensures that the corrections are updated before the next download of files. After the files have been refreshed each weekend, all the data are then downloaded again, with the new download reflecting amendments made as a result of the validation reports. If any errors have not been corrected, they will continue to appear in the validation reports until the necessary amendments are made on ICOS.

The NICTS statistics team then ensure that all validations relating to the reporting period are amended prior to publication. Once these amendments have been checked, SPSS syntax programming is then used to generate the tables in the publication.

2.6 Counting rules

Receipts are counted from the date the case is committed to the Crown Court from the Magistrates court. Disposals are counted from the result date that a final order was made against the case changing the case status to dealt with.

2.7 Interpreting trends

Care should be taken when comparing data trends before and after 2007, when ICOS was introduced as the source for Crown Court data. For further advice on differences in data between years, please contact the statistician responsible for this bulletin.

2.8 Revisions

Any revision to data will be applied in light of the ASG (NICTS) Statistical Note 'Policy Statement on Revisions' which can be found on the Statistics and Research page of the Services section on the NICTS website:

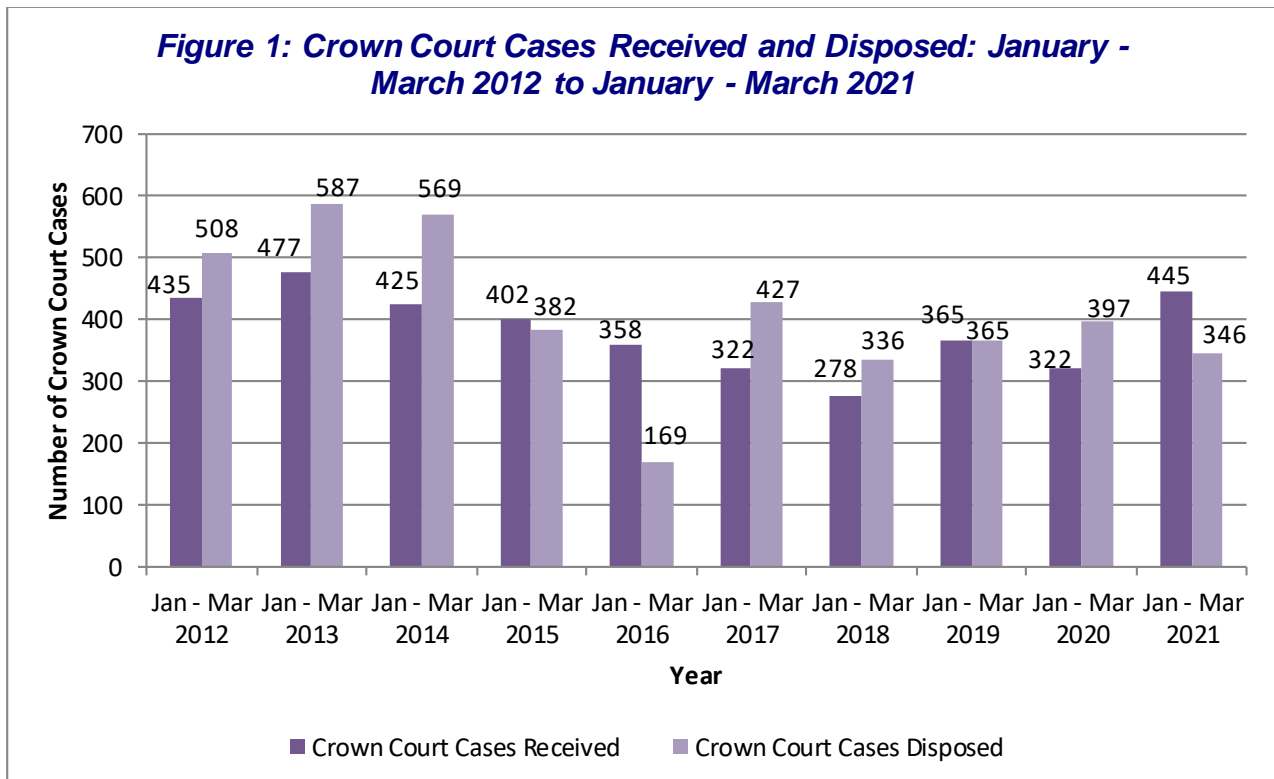
[Northern Ireland Court Service Statistical Publications](#)

Incorrect figures or changes to this publication will be published on the web in a formal Statistical Notice.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Receipts & Disposals

There were 445 Crown cases received during January to March 2021 (Table 1). This was a 38% increase on the 322 received during January to March 2020. The number of cases disposed has decreased by 13%, from 397 during January to March 2020, to 346 for the same period in 2021 (Table 2). The number of cases received and disposed for the January to March quarter over the last ten years is outlined in Figure 1.

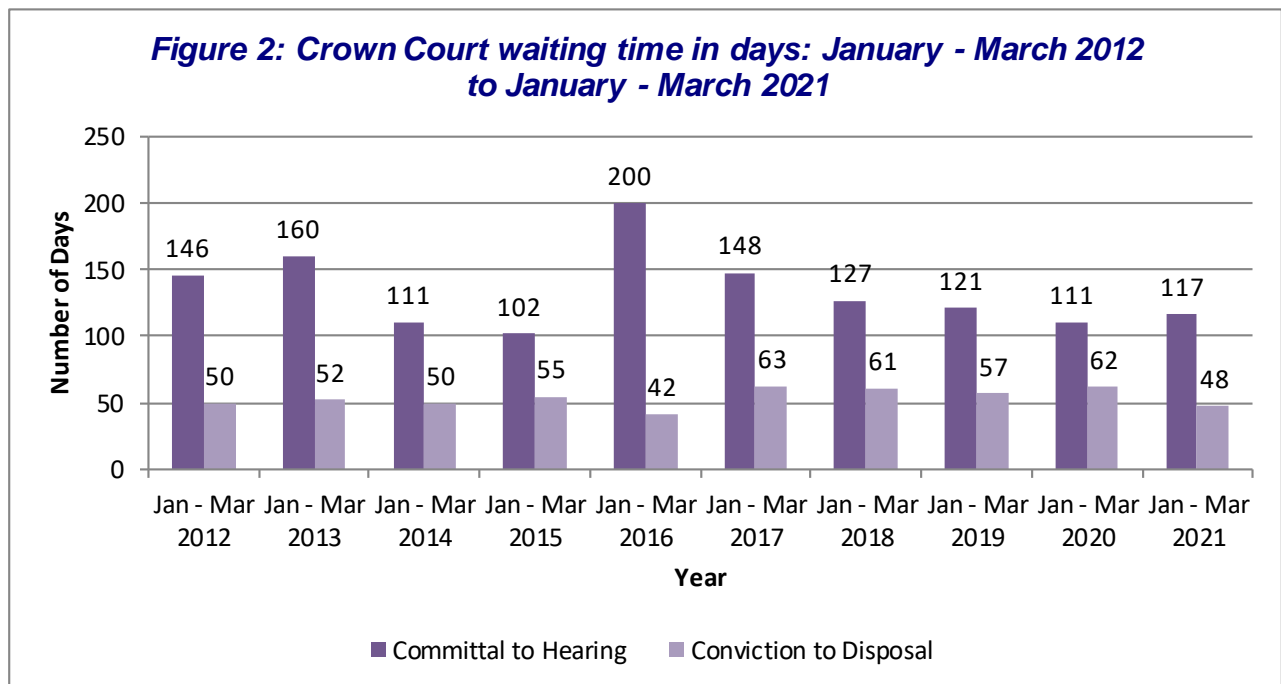


The trend in Crown Court cases received in the January to March quarter fluctuated during the period, peaking at 477 in 2013, before decreasing by 32% between 2013 and 2020, and then increasing again by 38% to 445 in 2021. The trend in cases disposed also fluctuated between 2012 and 2021, with peaks in 2013, and again in 2017.

There were 543 defendants received in the Crown Court during January to March 2021, an increase of 45% on the same period last year, when 375 defendants were received. There were 416 defendants disposed during January to March 2021 a 16% decrease against the same period last year, when 495 defendants were dealt with.

3.2 Waiting times

The average time from committal to hearing for January to March 2021 was 117 days, compared with 111 days for the same period in 2020. The average time from conviction to disposal was 48 days, compared with 62 days for the equivalent period in 2020. Average waiting times from committal to hearing have fluctuated over the last ten years peaking in 2016 at 200 days, however this figure will have been affected by the cases delayed due to the legal aid dispute which had started to progress through the Crown Court (Figure 2). The average waiting times from conviction to disposal have also fluctuated over the last ten years ranging between 42 and 63 days, peaking at 63 days in 2017. The 2021 figures will have been affected by delays resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

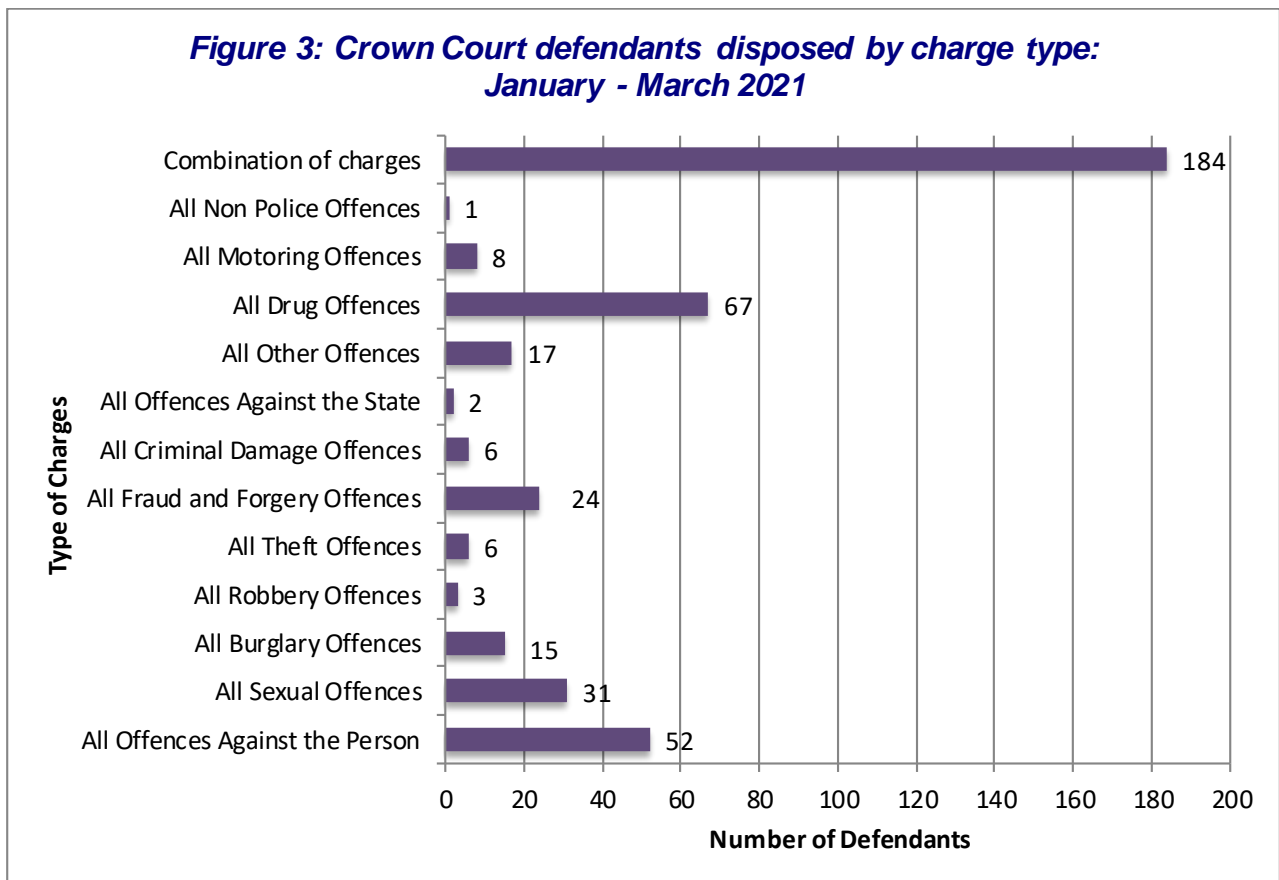


3.3 Disposals by Judge Type

County Court Judges disposed of 99% of defendants (412) and during the same quarter last year they disposed of 97% (481) defendants. The percentage of defendants disposed of by County Court Judges has remained relatively stable over the time series, ranging between 96% and 100%.

3.4 Disposals by Charge Type

Between January and March 2021, 13% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person while 44% of defendants had a combination of charges (Figure 3). During the same period last year 11% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person, and 44% of defendants had a combination of charges. Throughout the time series the majority of defendants disposed of each year have been charged with a combination of offences. Defendants charged solely with drug offences account for the next largest offence category in 2021 (16%). Drug offences ranged from 7% to 16% for the January to March quarter between 2012 and 2021.



3.5 Outcome of Defendants

Of the 416 defendants disposed of during January to March 2021, 129 (31%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 172 (35%) during January to March 2020. In total 89% (370) of defendants pleaded guilty or were found guilty of at least one offence between January to March 2021. Across the ten year time series, this percentage ranged between 70% and 89%.

3.6 Sittings

In total there were 513 Crown Court sittings for January to March 2021 compared with 676 for January to March 2020 (a decrease of 24%), with a total time of 1,177 hours sat compared with 1,611 hours sat during the same period last year.

APPENDIX 1

Table 1 – Crown Court cases received

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	56
Belfast	188
Craigavon	66
Downpatrick	19
Dungannon	35
Londonderry	35
Newry	46
Total	445

Table 2 – Crown Court cases disposed

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	26
Belfast	150
Craigavon	58
Downpatrick	20
Dungannon	22
Londonderry	46
Newry	24
Total	346

Table 3 – Crown Court defendants received

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	62
Belfast	233
Craigavon	81
Downpatrick	20
Dungannon	48
Londonderry	39
Newry	60
Total	543

Table 4 – Crown Court defendants disposed

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	33
Belfast	183
Craigavon	68
Downpatrick	26
Dungannon	28
Londonderry	51
Newry	27
Total	416

Table 5 - Waiting times in days

Processing Office	Committal to hearing - days	Conviction to disposal - days	Total defendants disposed
Antrim	123	53	33
Belfast	94	44	172
Craigavon	109	62	64
Downpatrick	202	41	26
Dungannon	238	46	28
Londonderry	119	61	46
Newry	68	22	26
Total	117	48	395

[1] Excludes defendants who had a bench warrant or deferred sentence

Table 6 - Crown Court defendants disposed by judge type

Processing Office	County Court Judge	High Court Judge	Total
Antrim	33	0	33
Belfast	181	2	183
Craigavon	68	0	68
Downpatrick	24	2	26
Dungannon	28	0	28
Londonderry	51	0	51
Newry	27	0	27
Total	412	4	416

Table 7 – Crown Court defendants disposed by charge type

Charge Type	Total
All Offences Against the Person	52
All Sexual Offences	31
All Burglary Offences	15
All Robbery Offences	3
All Theft Offences	6
All Fraud and Forgery Offences	24
All Criminal Damage Offences	6
All Offences Against the State	2
All Other Offences	17
All Drug Offences	67
All Motoring Offences	8
All Non-Police Offences	1
Combination of charges	184
Total	416

Table 8 - Outcome of Crown Court Defendants

	Plea of guilty on all charges	Plea of not guilty on at least one charge - found guilty on at least one charge	Plea of not guilty - acquitted on all charges	All charges withdrawn	Total
Antrim	15	12	6	0	33
Belfast	59	107	17	0	183
Craigavon	20	38	9	1	68
Downpatrick	4	20	2	0	26
Dungannon	3	20	5	0	28
Londonderry	21	25	5	0	51
Newry	7	19	1	0	27
Total	129	241	45	1	416

Table 9 - Crown Court sitting times

	Number of sittings	Total time
Antrim	60	193:20
Armagh	5	1:14
Ballymena	2	0:38
Belfast	210	440:06
Coleraine	1	0:30
Craigavon	48	156:25
Dungannon	51	109:04
Londonderry	52	112:39
Newry	54	112:39
Royal Courts of Justice	30	50:02
Total	513	1176:37

[2] Data indicate the court venue in which the sitting took place

[3] Administrative case management reviews were introduced by the Lord Chief Justice as part of the coronavirus contingency arrangements. This has resulted in Judges investing significant time reviewing cases and making directions or orders administratively (where appropriate), and this has continued even as courts have resumed to support business recovery. This extra time is not recorded on the courts operating system (ICOS), and therefore is not reflected within the sittings times published within this report.

APPENDIX 2 - EXPLANATORY NOTES

Acquittal

A judgement or verdict that a person is not guilty of the crime with which they have been charged

Arraignment

The procedure by which the defendant has criminal charges formally put to him before the judge at the Crown Court and he enters his plea of guilty

Committal

The procedure by which a person is returned for trial to the Crown Court by the magistrates' court, if the magistrates' court is satisfied that there is a case to answer.

County court judge

A judge who sits in the county court and the Crown Court.

Day sat

This is a day on which a judge sat to hear court business. The information is organised into the various types of court business that a judge hears. The judge's day may consist of one or more sittings, at one or more court venues.

Disposed

The date the case is finally dealt with via a court or non-court result and the case is no longer in the court process.

High Court Judge

A judge who sits in the High Court and the Crown Court to hear and determine civil, family, and criminal business.

Hybrid charge

This is also referred to as a 'triable-either-way' offence. A criminal offence that may be prosecuted either summarily (in the magistrates' court) or on indictment (in the Crown Court). In the majority of cases, the prosecution decides how the offence is tried depending on the seriousness of the offence.

Indictable charge

A serious criminal offence where the defendant is usually tried in the Crown Court.

Indictable triable summarily charge

A serious criminal offence where a defendant can be tried in the Crown Court but may in some instances be tried in a magistrates' court.

Justice & Security Act 2007

Legislation which replaced the Terrorism Act 2000 which makes provision for non-jury trials.

Plea

The response a defendant gives after criminal charges have been put to him e.g. "guilty" or "not guilty."

Scheduled

A scheduled offence is one which is listed in Schedule 9 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and which, if it is tried on indictment, will be heard by a judge sitting without a jury. This has been replaced by the Justice and Security Act 2007.

Sitting

This is a period of work by a judge in a single courtroom on a single day. Several types of business may be heard at one sitting. Business heard in different courtrooms, whether at the same venue or elsewhere, is counted as separate sittings.

Withdrawn

An order which removes a case from court, for a variety of reasons. The court action then ceases.

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