






CASE PROCESSING TIME FOR CRIMINAL CASES DEALT WITH AT COURTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND APRIL 2021 TO MARCH 2022

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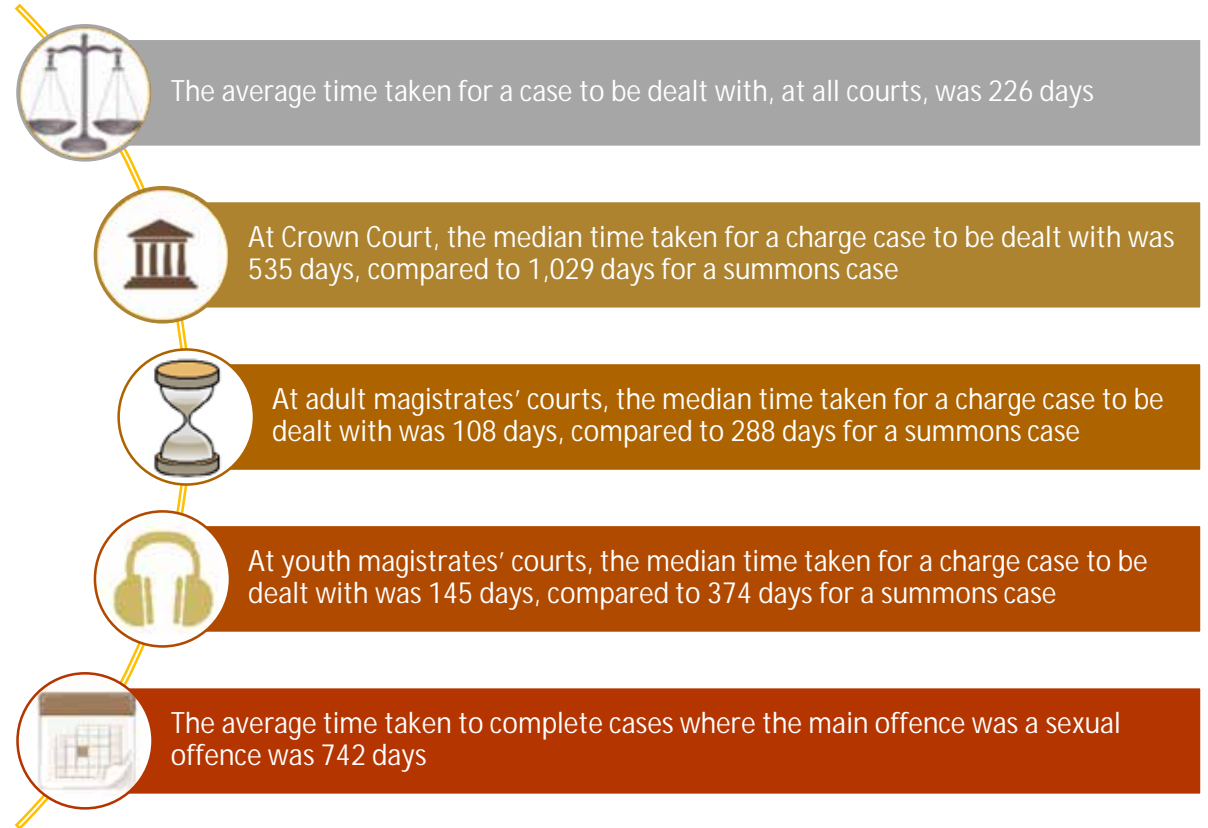
1 | Key Findings

1.1 About this bulletin

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 2021 to 31 March 2022 and refers to the time from which the offence was reported to, or detected by, the police. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was still evident in the justice system in 2021-22. The numbers recorded in this bulletin reflect this impact as well as the measures introduced to support recovery and reduce the backlog of cases which arose during that time.

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

Main Points in 2020-21



1 | Key Findings

1.2 Overall

- Prior to the pandemic, the time taken for cases to be completed had been showing a general improvement. The pandemic however, impacted on the levels of court business which could be conducted, during 2020-21 in particular. This meant that, for a large part of that year, cases were not able to proceed through the system at a rate they might otherwise have done, resulting in a backlog of cases to be cleared in 2021-22 and going forward.
- The average time taken for a case to be dealt with, at **all courts**, was 226 days, an increase of 17.1% from the previous year (193 days) and the highest figure recorded in the last five years.

1.3 Crown Court

- In 2021-22, the average time taken for a charge case to be dealt with at Crown Court was 535 days, an increase of 13.8% from 2020-21 (470 days).
- The average time taken for a summons case was 1,029 days, an increase of 9.6% from 2020-21 (939 days).

1.4 Adult Magistrates' Courts

- In 2021-22, the average time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts**, was 108 days, a decrease of 11.5% from the previous year (122 days).
- The average time taken for a **summons case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts**, was 288 days, an increase of 35.8% from 212 days in 2020-21.

1.5 Youth Magistrates' Courts

- In 2021-22, the average time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **youth magistrates' courts**, was 145 days, a decrease of 22.5% from 2020-21 (187 days).
- The average time taken for a **summons case** to be dealt with at **youth magistrates' courts**, was 374 days, an increase of 14.7% from the 326 days taken in 2020-21.

1.6 Processing Times by Offence Category

- In 2021-22, the average time taken to complete cases where the main offence was a motoring one was 192 days. The comparative figure for sexual offences was 742 days.

2 | Introduction

2.1 About this bulletin

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.

Produced in accordance with the pillars and principles set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics, this bulletin 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 from 1 April 2021 to 31

March 2022. 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 2023, will be published in September 2023. A full [publication schedule](#) is available on the DoJ website.

3 | Cases

3.1 Cases included

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.

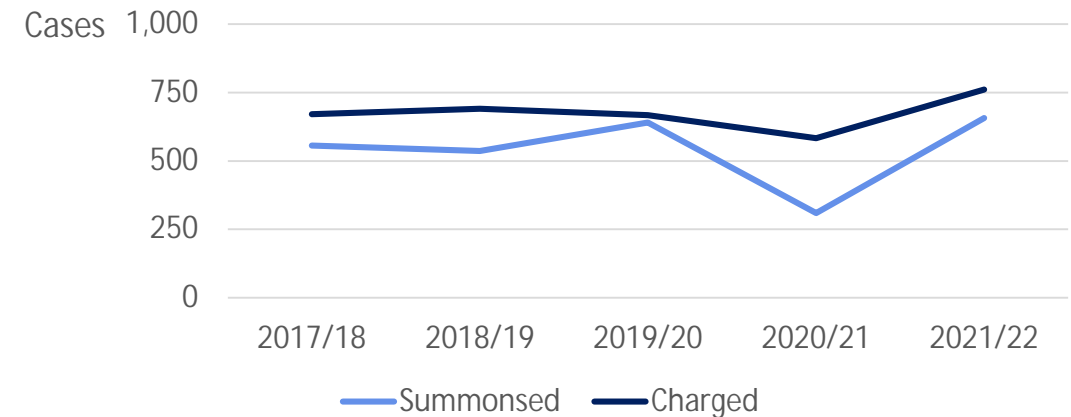
3.2 Overall

In 2021-22, the number of overall cases completed (which were included in the dataset) was 25,816, an increase of 43.4% from the total in 2020-21 (18,006). The increase in the numbers of cases completed during the current year reflects the impact of measures introduced to assist on recovery of backlogs from 2020-21, when the completion of cases was affected by lockdowns and other restrictions, introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.3 Crown Court

At Crown Court, there were 1,418 cases completed, a 58.8% increase on 2020-21 and the highest figure recorded in the last five years.

Figure 1a: Number of included Crown Court cases



3 | Cases

3.4 Adult Magistrates

The number of charge cases completed (7,547) at adult magistrates' courts increased by 23.6% compared to the previous year (6,106); the number of summons cases completed (15,979) rose by 55.5% (10,276). Both of these respective totals in 2021-22 were the highest recorded in the last five years.

3.5 Youth Magistrates

At 237, the number of charge cases at youth magistrates' courts was 19.4% less than the same figure in 2020-21 (294) 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 (635) increased by 45.3% compared to the previous year (437 in 2020-21). While an improvement from 2020-21, this most recent figure is still the second lowest in the last 5 years for this type of case (Figures 1a, 1b and 1c, Tables 1 - 8 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 1b: Number of included Adult Magistrates Court cases

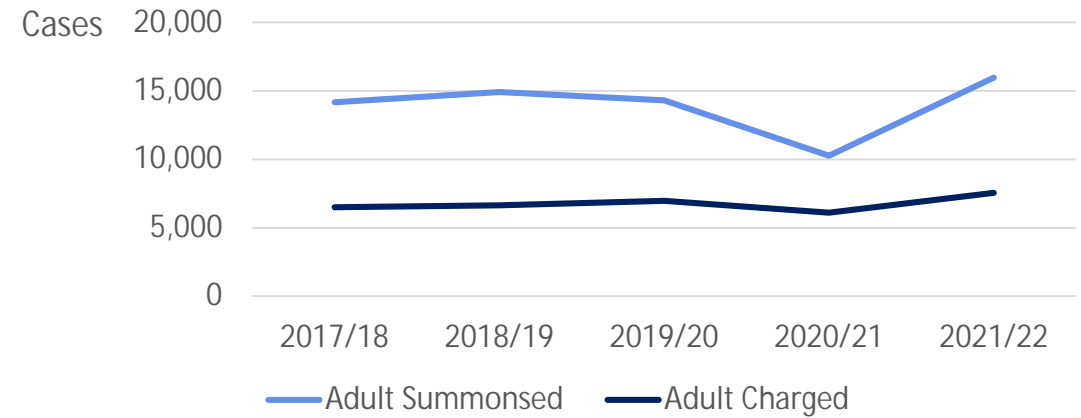
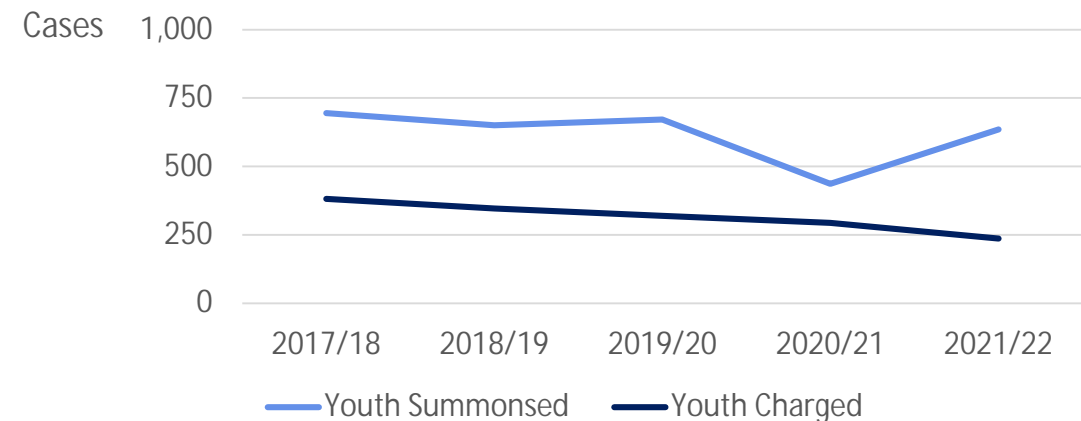


Figure 1c: Number of included Youth Magistrates' Court cases



4 | Time Taken

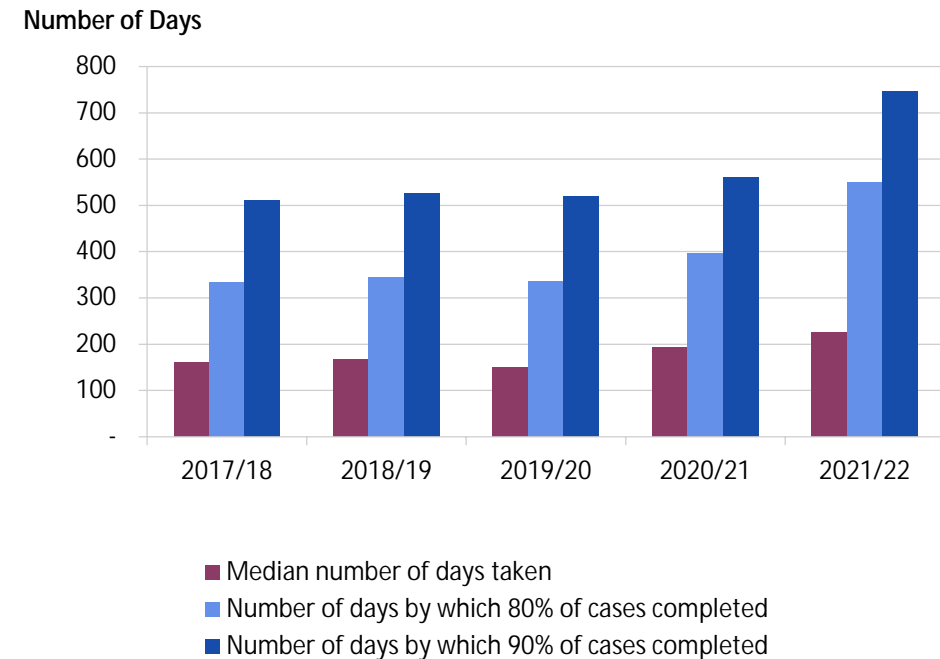
4.1 All Cases

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 bulletin, the length of time in which 80% and 90% of cases are completed is also reported.

In 2021-22, 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 226 days. This is an increase of 17.1% from the median of 193 days taken in 2020-21 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 was 550 days. This is an increase of 38.9% from 2020-21 (396 days). The figure of 746 days, in relation to the time by which 90% of cases were completed, was 33.0% 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



4 | Time Taken

4.2 Crown Court

In 2021-22, the median time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **Crown Court** was 535 days, an increase of 13.8% from 2020-21 (470 days) and the highest in the last 5 years. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken was 788 days, an increase of 12.7% from 2020-21. The figure of 957 days, in relation to the time by which 90% of cases were completed, was 5.7% higher than that recorded in 2020-21 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 2021-22, the median time was 1,029 days, an increase of 9.6% from the previous year (939 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 was 1,591 days, again the highest period of time recorded for this type of case in the past five years, and an increase of 14.5% from 2020-21 (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

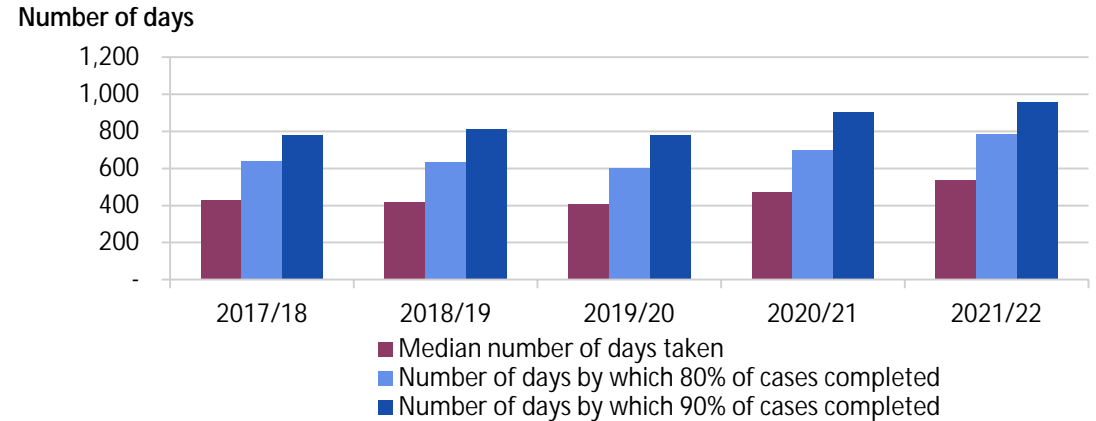
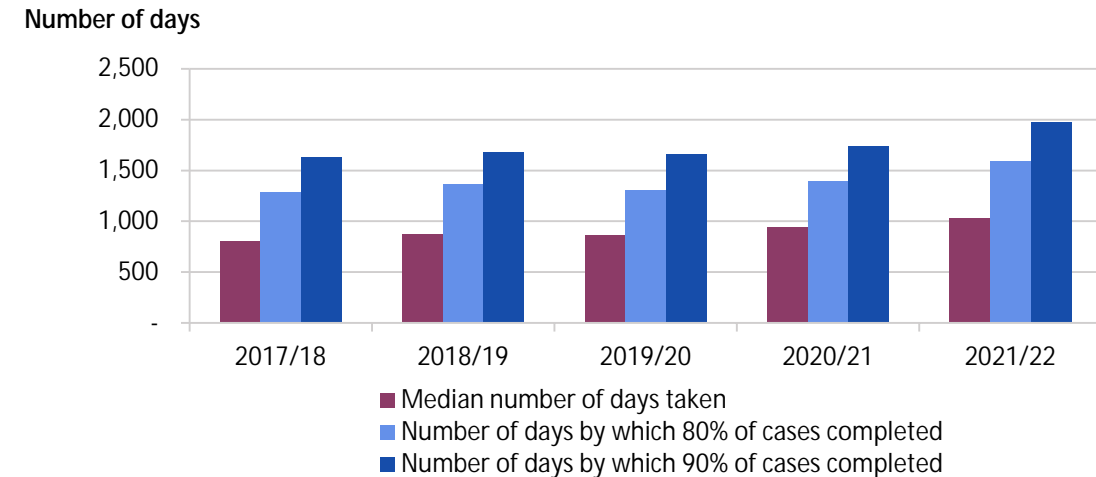


Figure 4: Time taken for summons cases dealt with at Crown Court from date incident reported to disposal at court



4 | Time Taken

4.3 Adult Magistrates' Courts

In 2021-22, the median time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts** from the date the offence was reported was 108 days, a decrease of 11.5% from 2020-21 but still the second highest figure recorded in the last five years. The number of days taken by which 80% of cases were completed was 221 days, also the second highest value recorded for this type of case in the past five years and a decrease of 16.9% from the previous year. Similarly, the number of days by which 90% of cases were completed (322 days) was down 10.6% from the figure recorded in 2020-21, (Figure 5, Table 4 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

In 2021-22, the median time taken for a **summons case** to be dealt with at **adult magistrates' courts** was 288 days, an increase of 35.8% from 2020-21 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 was 592 days, an increase of 40.0% from 2020-21. The number of days by which 90% of cases were completed was 767 days, an increase of 30.4% from the figure recorded in 2020-21 (Figure 6, Table 5 in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 5: Time taken for charge cases completed at magistrates' courts, from date incident reported to disposal at court

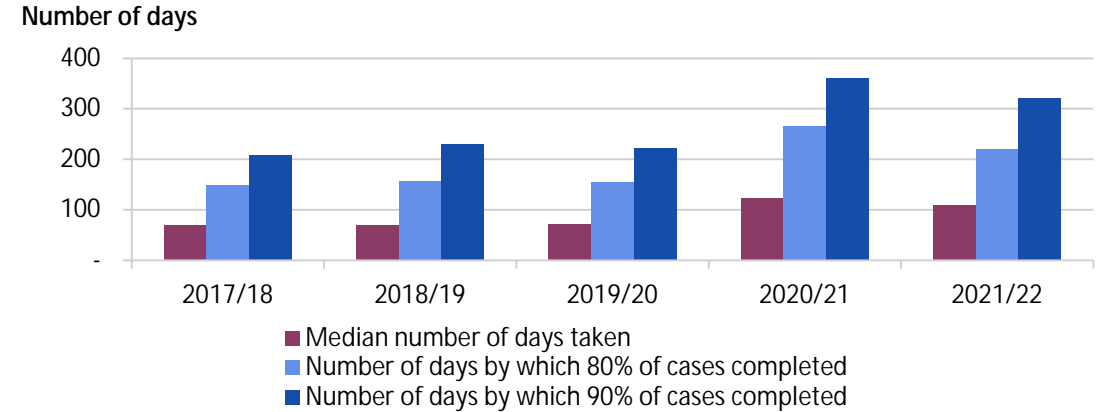
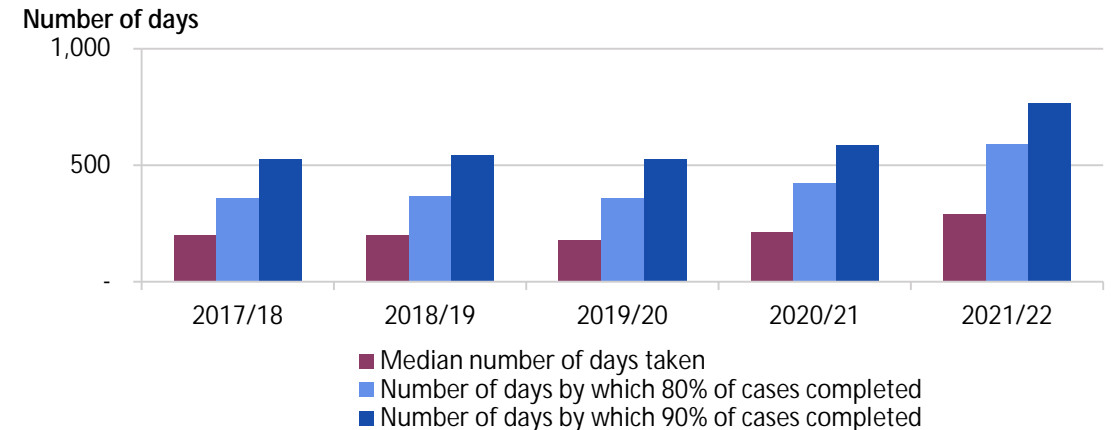


Figure 6: Time taken for summons cases completed at adult magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court



4 | Time Taken

4.4 Youth Magistrates' Courts

In 2021-22, the median time taken for a **charge case** to be dealt with at **youth magistrates' courts**, was 145 days, a decrease of 22.5% from the previous year (187 days) but still the second highest recorded in the last five years. Similarly, 80% of cases were completed, within 307 days in 2021-22, a decrease of 7.5% from the previous year, and also the second 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 374 days, an increase of 14.7% from 2020-21 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 664 days, up 29.4% from that recorded for this type of case in 2020-21 (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

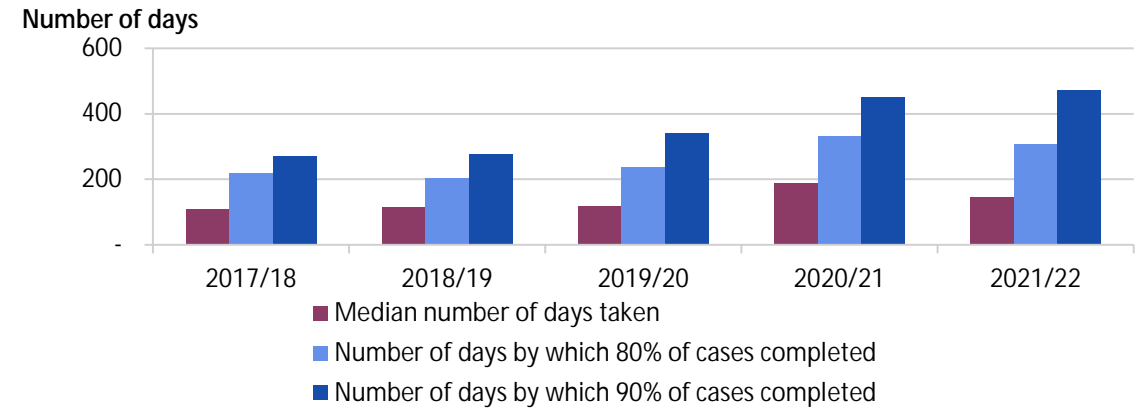
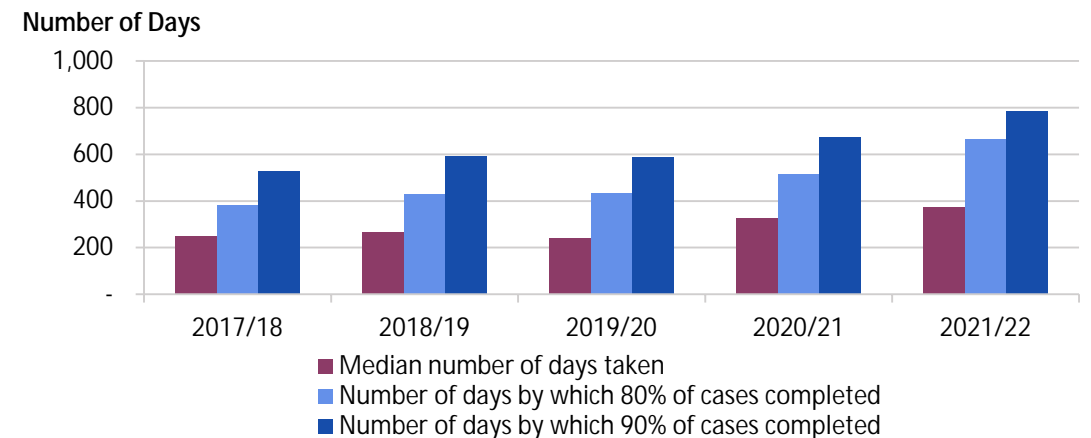


Figure 8: Time taken for summons cases completed at youth magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court



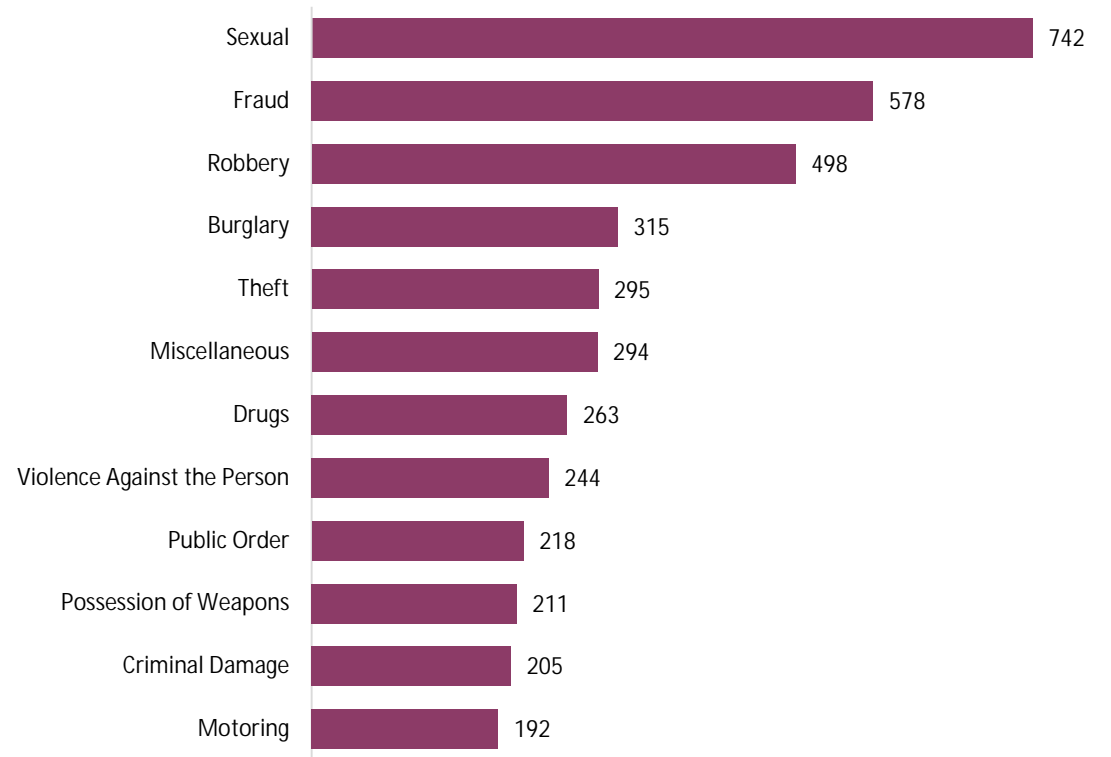
4 | Time Taken

4.5 Offence Category

In 2021-22, the median time taken for cases where the main offence was sexual was 742 days, the longest for any of the offence categories. This is an increase of 27.7% on the figure for 2020-21 and the highest median figure, for this type of case, recorded in the last five years. Cases where the main offence category was motoring (192 days) or Criminal Damage & Arson (205 days) had the shortest average times taken, from offence reported to disposal at court. Both of these figures were, however, among 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.

Figure 9: Time taken for all cases to complete at courts by offence category



5 | 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. 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).



5 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

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.

5 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

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.

5 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

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.

The court structure of Northern Ireland does not equate to the court structures of England and Wales, Scotland or the Republic of Ireland, and therefore no comparisons have been made between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and 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.

5 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Data strengths and validation

Strengths

- Causeway is an integrated messaging system specifically designed to support information sharing between the five main NI Criminal Justice organisations. The information recorded within the individual organisations is used to manage day to day business and to communicate between the other organisations, so needs to be highly accurate.
- The system works well and is trusted by the staff who use it. It is reliable and needs minimal maintenance.
- A number of key personnel are involved in managing Causeway and have developed a high level of competence and experience of the system.
- The data are sourced from an administrative data system and therefore are a complete record of all cases (i.e. are not based on a sample). Key fields used for the generation of these statistics are complete and logical.
- Processes and systems have been developed and refined over the years to address any quality concerns that emerged and the statisticians have developed a complex and detailed series of validation checks which are applied to the data to ensure any anomalies are corrected.

Limitations

- The system depends on staff within five separate Criminal Justice organisations inputting details and updating records on their own systems. While there is the potential for problems to occur if details aren't updated on a timely basis or if input errors occur, the nature of the information make accuracy critical.

5 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

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 2021-22, when measured using the median, was 226 days compared to 339 days when measured using the mean. This latter figure however, equates to the 64th 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

