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C Darragh

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Produced by Analytical Services Group,
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For further information write to:

**Analytical Services Group,
NI Courts and Tribunals Service,
4th Floor, Laganside House,
23-27 Oxford Street,
Belfast BT1 3LA**

Telephone: 028 9072 8927

Email: caroline.darragh@courtsni.gov.uk

This bulletin is available on the Internet at:

[Northern Ireland Court Service Statistical Publications](#)

Executive Summary

This report covers data from July to September 2021, and although the court recovery program is progressing, court activity during this period continues to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 July to September 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 July to September 2021:
- There were 412 Crown cases received during July to September 2021 (Table 1). This was a 58% increase on the 261 received during July to September 2020. The number of cases disposed increased by 22%, from 197 during July to September 2020, to 241 for the same period in 2021 (Table 2).
- The average time from committal to hearing for July to September 2021 was 128 days, compared with 126 days for the same period in 2020. The average time from conviction to disposal was 78 days, compared with 92 days for the equivalent period in 2020. The average waiting times for defendants disposed in the July to September quarter over the last ten years is outlined in Figure 2.
- County Court Judges disposed of 99.3% of defendants (288) and during the same quarter last year they disposed of 99.6% (242) defendants. 14% of defendants were charged solely with sexual offences, while 45% of defendants had a combination of charges. During the same period last year 8% of defendants were charged solely with sexual offences, and 47% of defendants had a combination of charges. The charge types for defendants disposed during July to September 2021 are outlined in Figure 3.
- Of the 290 defendants disposed during July to September 2021, 84 (29%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 85 (35%) during July to September 2020.
- In total there were 461 Crown Court sittings for July to September 2021 compared with 284 for July to September 2020 (a 62% increase), with a total time of 935 hours sat compared with 387 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 fourth quarter of 2021 and will be published on 11th February 2022.

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:

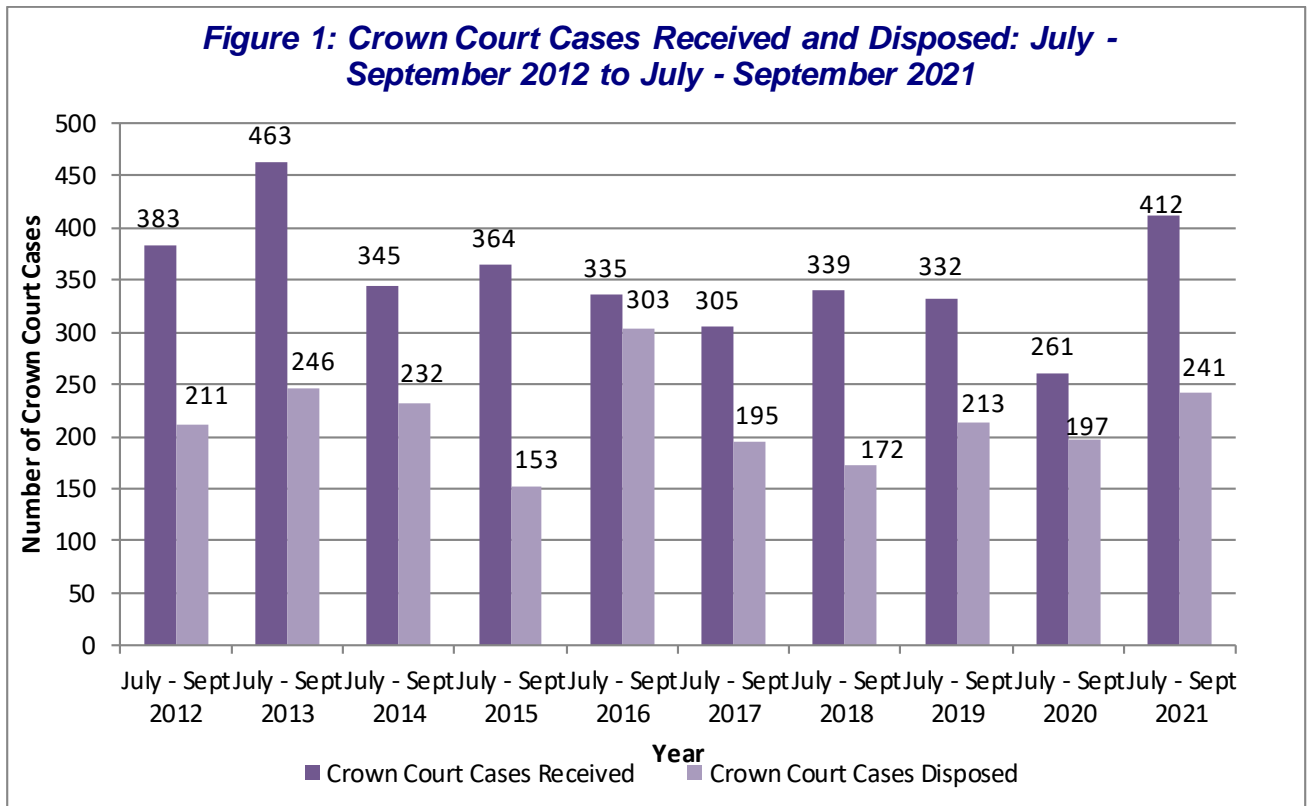
[Northern Ireland Court Service Statistical Publications](#)

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 412 Crown cases received during July to September 2021 (Table 1). This was a 58% increase on the 261 received during July to September 2020. The number of cases disposed has increased 22%, from 197 during July to September 2020, to 241 for the same period in 2021 (Table 2). The number of cases received and disposed for the July to September quarter over the last ten years is outlined in Figure 1.

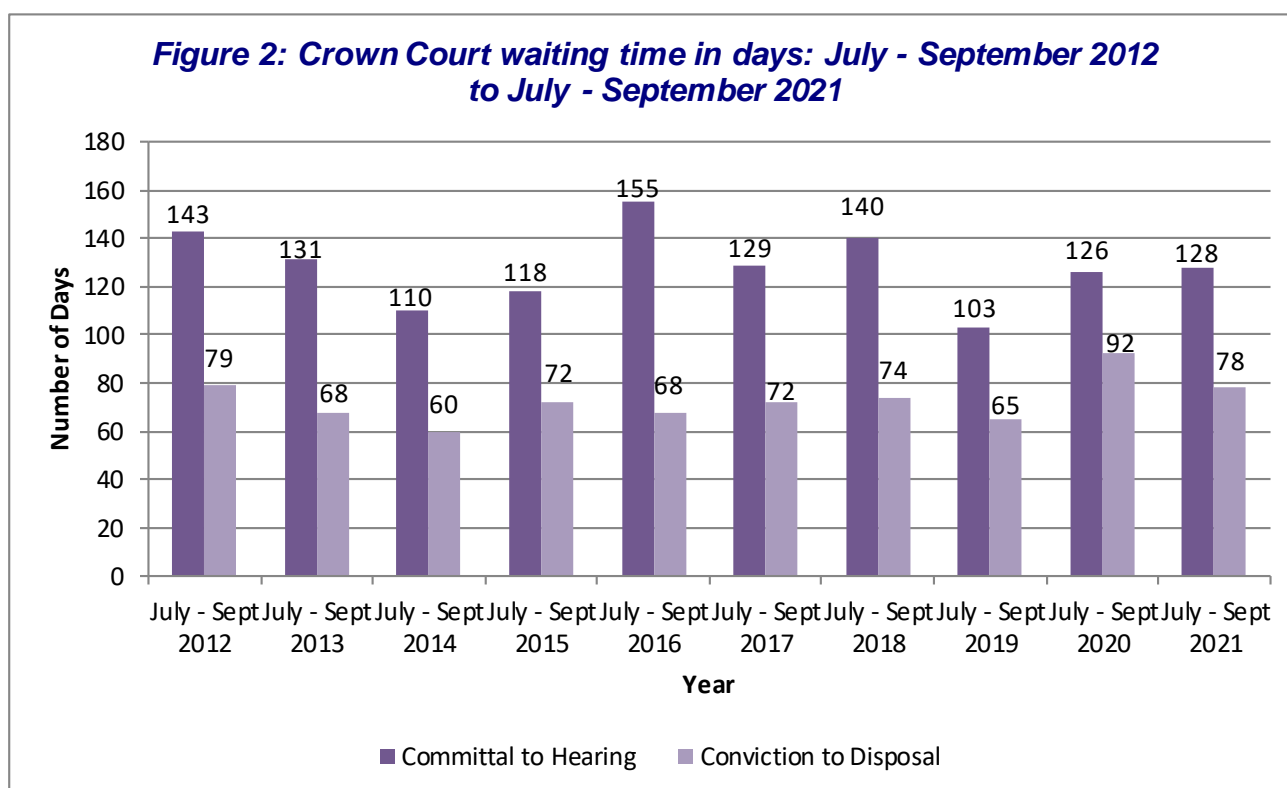


The trend in Crown Court cases received in the July to September quarter fluctuated during the period, with the highest level of receipts over the last ten years occurring in 2013, at 463. The trend in cases disposed also fluctuated between 2012 and 2021, peaking in 2016 at 303. (Data for 2020 should be treated with caution as the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent limited operation of the Crown Court had a significant impact upon receipts and disposals).

There were 501 defendants received in the Crown Court during July to September 2021, an increase of 59% on the same period last year, when 316 defendants were received. There were 290 defendants disposed during July to September 2021 an increase of 19% against the same period last year, when 243 defendants were dealt with.

3.2 Waiting times

The average time from committal to hearing for July to September 2021 was 128 days, compared with 126 days for the same period in 2020. The average time from conviction to disposal was 78 days, compared with 92 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 155 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 60 and 92 days, peaking at 92 days in 2020. The 2020 and 2021 figures will have been affected by delays resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

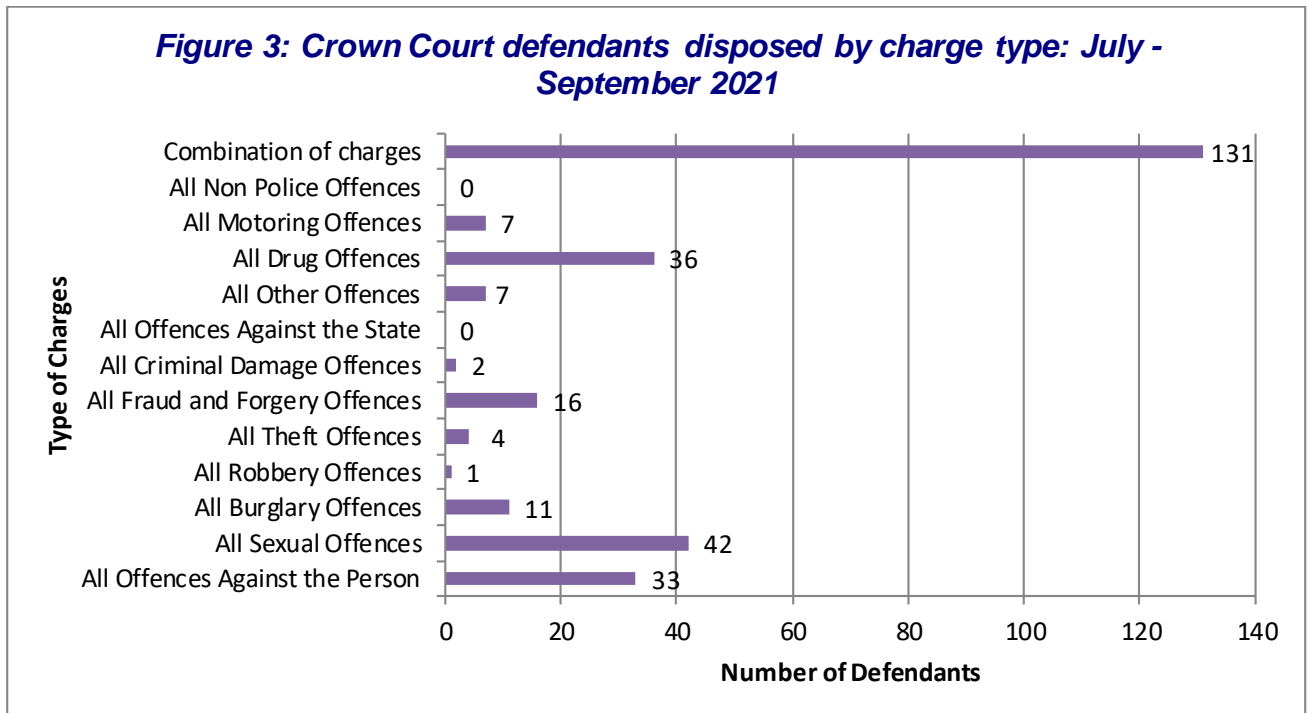


3.3 Disposals by Judge Type

County Court Judges disposed of 99.3% of defendants (288) and during the same quarter last year they disposed of 99.6% (242) 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 July to September 2021, 11% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person while 45% of defendants had a combination of charges (Figure 3). During the same period last year 9% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person, and 47% 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 sexual offences account for the next largest offence category in 2021 (14%). Sexual offences ranged from 8% to 14% for the July to September quarter between 2012 and 2021.



3.5 Outcome of Defendants

Of the 290 defendants disposed of during July to September 2021, 84 (29%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 85 (35%) during July to September 2020. In total 89% (258) of defendants pleaded guilty or were found guilty of at least one offence between July to September 2021. Across the ten year time series, this percentage ranged between 84% and 96%.

3.6 Sitings

In total there were 461 Crown Court sittings for July to September 2021 compared with 284 for July to September 2020 (a 62% increase), with a total time of 935 hours sat compared with 387 hours sat during the same period last year.

APPENDIX 1

Table 1 – Crown Court cases received

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	64
Belfast	118
Craigavon	43
Downpatrick	47
Dungannon	50
Londonderry	51
Newry	39
Total	412

Table 2 – Crown Court cases disposed

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	31
Belfast	93
Craigavon	24
Downpatrick	25
Dungannon	24
Londonderry	23
Newry	21
Total	241

Table 3 – Crown Court defendants received

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	78
Belfast	153
Craigavon	45
Downpatrick	56
Dungannon	56
Londonderry	62
Newry	51
Total	501

Table 4 – Crown Court defendants disposed

Processing Office	Total
Antrim	36
Belfast	115
Craigavon	27
Downpatrick	27
Dungannon	30
Londonderry	29
Newry	26
Total	290

Table 5 - Waiting times in days

Processing Office	Committal to hearing - days	Conviction to disposal - days	Total defendants disposed
Antrim	108	79	35
Belfast	154	82	105
Craigavon	78	92	25
Downpatrick	64	43	26
Dungannon	145	82	28
Londonderry	115	77	27
Newry	155	80	25
Total	128	78	271

[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	36	0	36
Belfast	114	1	115
Craigavon	27	0	27
Downpatrick	27	0	27
Dungannon	29	1	30
Londonderry	29	0	29
Newry	26	0	26
Total	288	2	290

Table 7 – Crown Court defendants disposed by charge type

Charge Type	Total
All Offences Against the Person	33
All Sexual Offences	42
All Burglary Offences	11
All Robbery Offences	1
All Theft Offences	4
All Fraud and Forgery Offences	16
All Criminal Damage Offences	2
All Offences Against the State	0
All Other Offences	7
All Drug Offences	36
All Motoring Offences	7
All Non-Police Offences	0
Combination of charges	131
Total	290

Table 8 - Outcome of Crown Court Defendants

Processing Office	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	14	18	4	0	36
Belfast	34	63	18	0	115
Craigavon	9	17	1	0	27
Downpatrick	3	23	1	0	27
Dungannon	9	19	2	0	30
Londonderry	8	18	3	0	29
Newry	7	16	3	0	26
Total	84	174	32	0	290

Table 9 - Crown Court sitting times

Venue	Number of sittings	Total time
Antrim	64	139:46
Armagh	2	2:15
Belfast	199	337:05
Craigavon	29	75:59
Downpatrick	6	6:50
Dungannon	64	159:00
Londonderry	28	54:03
Newry	64	159:15
Royal Courts of Justice	5	1:15
Total	461	935:28

[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.

Analytical Services Group,
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Belfast BT1 3LA

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