

Analytical Services Group
Crown Court Bulletin

January to March 2020

Research and Statistical Bulletin
Provisional Figures

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<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/articles/nicts-statistics-and-research>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This bulletin provides information on throughput at Crown Courts in Northern Ireland during the period January to March 2020 and commentary on trends observed for this quarter in each year from 2011. 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 2020:
- There were 322 Crown cases received during January to March 2020 (Table 1). This was a 12% decrease on the 365 received during January to March 2019. The number of cases disposed has increased by 9%, from 365 during January to March 2019, to 397 for the same period in 2020 (Table 2).
- The average time from committal to hearing for January to March 2020 was 111 days, compared with 121 days for the same period in 2019. The average time from conviction to disposal was 62 days, compared with 57 days for the equivalent period in 2019. 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 97% of defendants (481) and during the same quarter last year they disposed of 99% (455) defendants. 11% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person while 44% of defendants had a combination of charges. During the same period last year 15% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person, and 42% of defendants had a combination of charges. The charge types for defendants disposed during January to March 2020 are outlined in Figure 3.
- Of the 495 defendants disposed during January to March 2020, 172 (35%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 158 (34%) during January to March 2019.
- In total there were 676 Crown Court sittings for January to March 2020 compared with 698 for January to March 2019 (a decrease of 3%), with a total time of 1611 hours sat compared with 1633 hours sat during the same period last year.

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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 2020. 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 2020 and will be published on 7th August 2020.

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:

<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/articles/nicts-statistics-and-research>

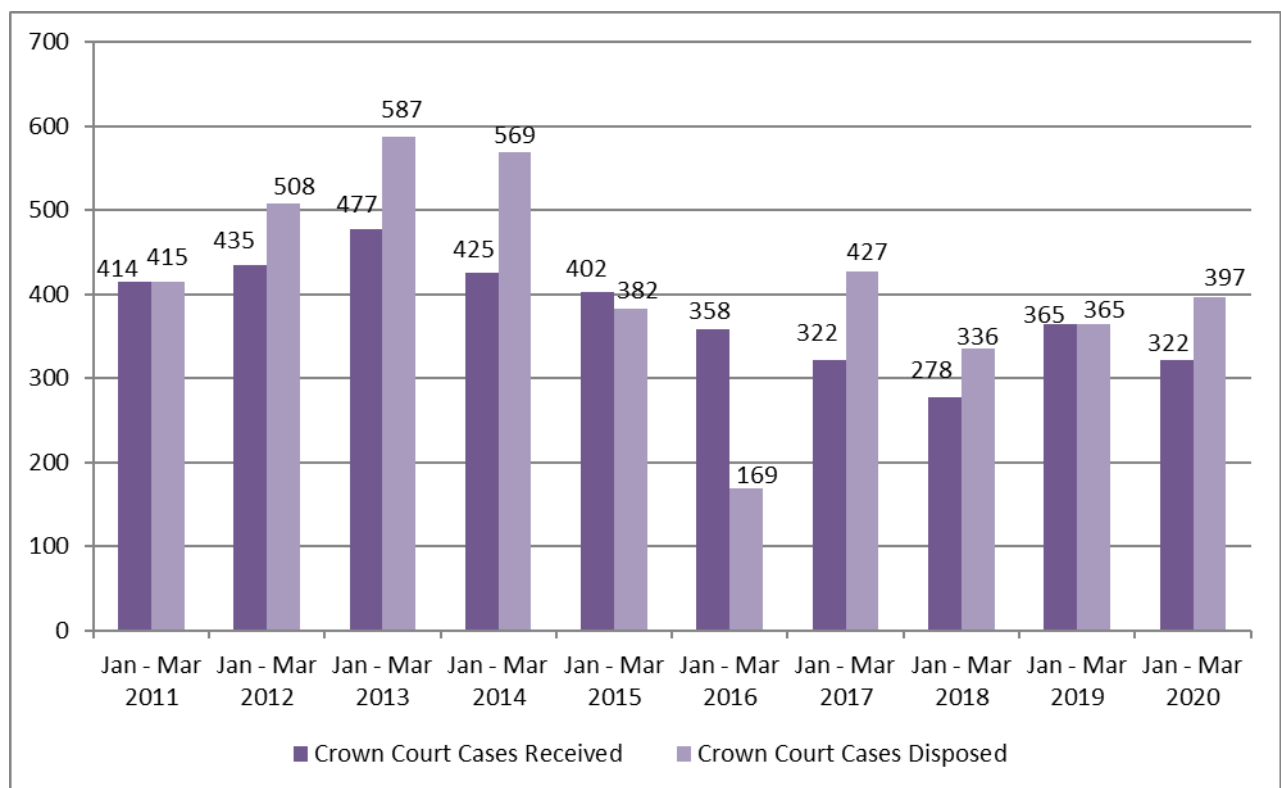
Incorrect figures or changes to this publication will be published on the web in a formal Statistical Notice.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Receipts & Disposals

There were 322 Crown cases received during January to March 2020 (Table 1). This was a 12% decrease on the 365 received during January to March 2019. The number of cases disposed has increased by 9%, from 365 during January to March 2019, to 397 for the same period in 2020 (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.

Figure 1: Crown Court Cases Received and Disposed: January - March 2011 to January - March 2020



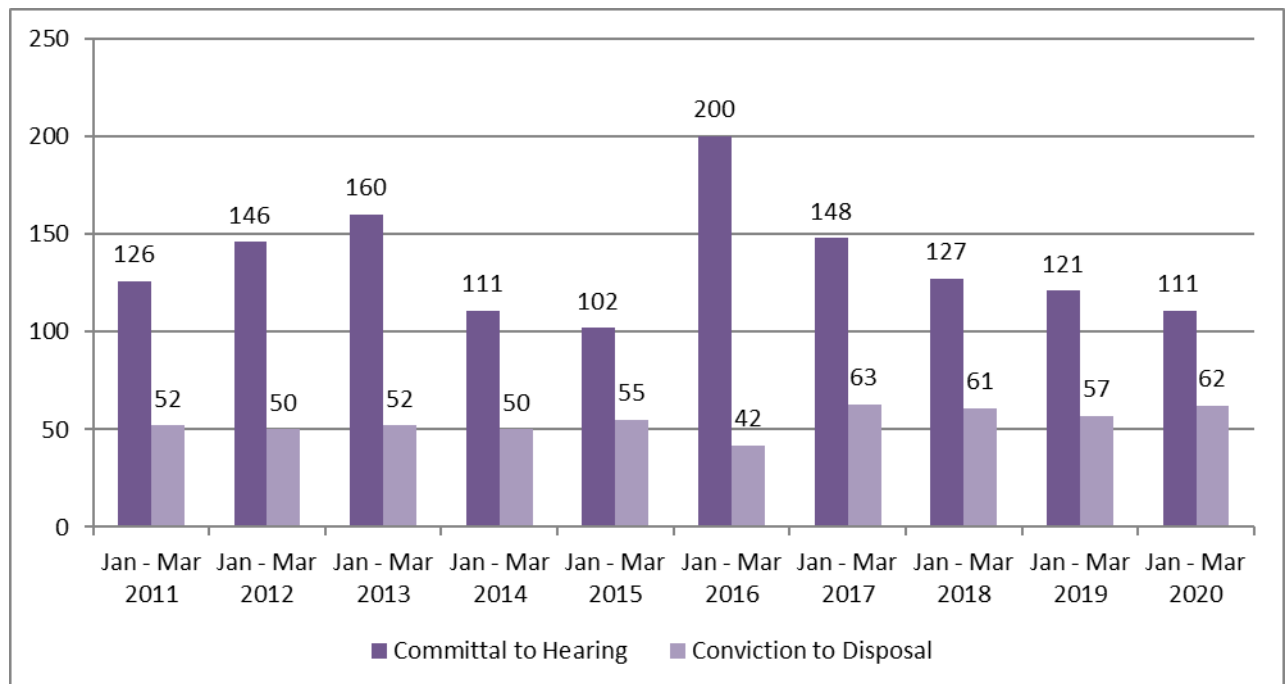
The trend in Crown Court cases received in the January to March quarter fluctuated during the period, peaking at 477 in 2013, before decreasing by 32% between 2013 and 2020. The trend in cases disposed also fluctuated between 2011 and 2020, with peaks in 2013, 2014 and again in 2017. The sharp increase in 2017 was mainly due to the attempts to clear the backlog of cases created as a result of the legal aid dispute.

There were 375 defendants received in the Crown Court during January to March 2020, a decrease of 13% on the same period last year, when 430 defendants were received. There were 495 defendants disposed during January to March 2020 a 7% increase against the same period last year, when 461 defendants were dealt with.

3.2 Waiting times

The average time from committal to hearing for January to March 2020 was 111 days, compared with 121 days for the same period in 2019. The average time from conviction to disposal was 62 days, compared with 57 days for the equivalent period in 2019. 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.

Figure 2: Crown Court waiting times in days: January - March 2011 to January - March 2020



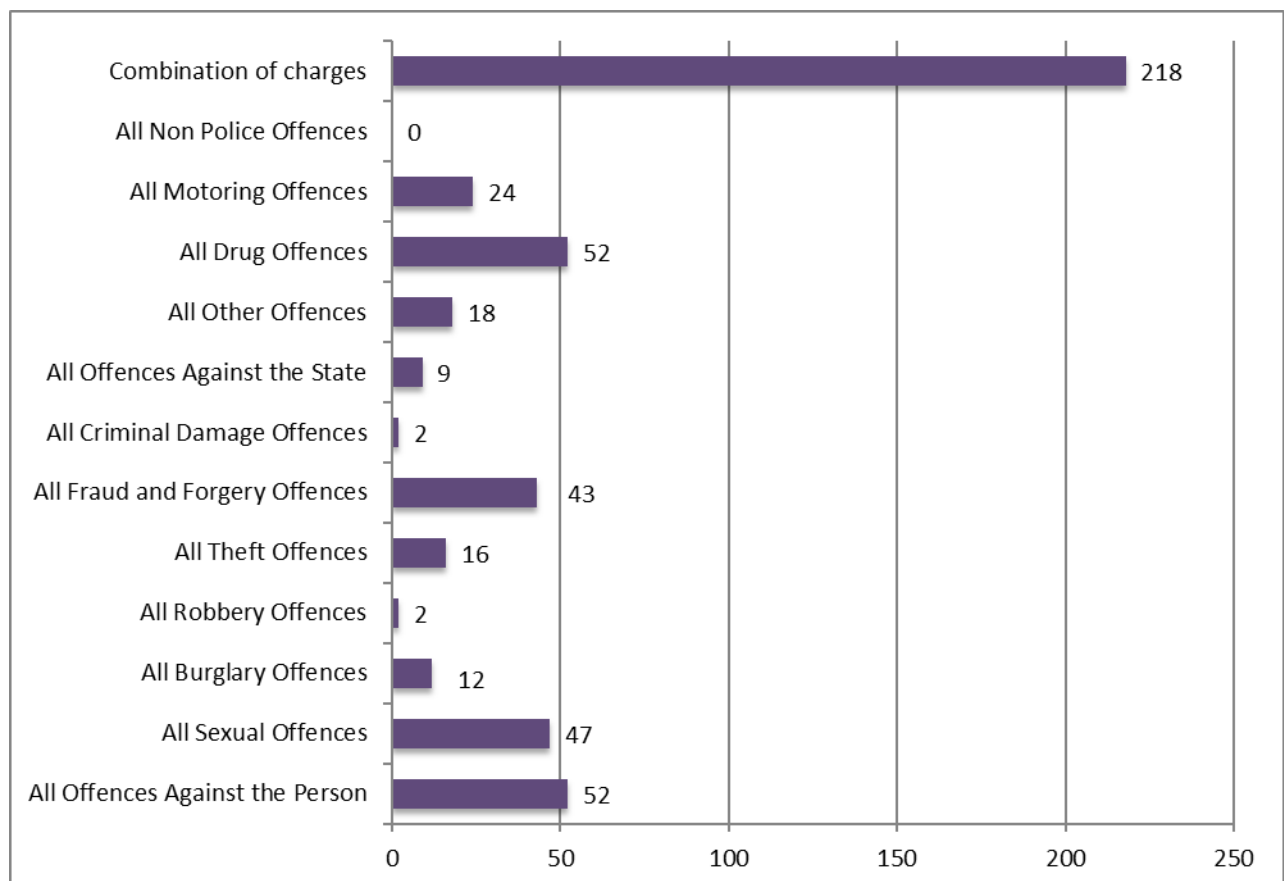
3.3 Disposals by Judge Type

County Court Judges disposed of 97% of defendants (481) and during the same quarter last year they disposed of 99% (455) defendants. The percentage of defendants disposed of by County Court Judges has remained relatively stable over the time series, ranging between 96% and 99%.

3.4 Disposals by Charge Type

Between January and March 2020, 11% 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 15% of defendants were charged solely with offences against the person, and 42% 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 also account for the largest offence category in 2020 (11%). Drug offences ranged from 7% to 16% for the January to March quarter between 2011 and 2020.

Figure 3: Crown Court defendants disposed by charge type: January - March 2020



3.5 Outcome of Defendants

Of the 495 defendants disposed of during January to March 2020, 172 (35%) pleaded guilty to all charges, compared with 158 (34%) during January to March 2019. In total 88% (435) of defendants pleaded guilty or were found guilty of at least one offence between January to March 2020. Across the ten year time series, this percentage ranged between 70% and 88%.

3.6 Sitings

In total there were 676 Crown Court sittings for January to March 2020 compared with 698 for January to March 2019 (a decrease of 3%), with a total time of 1611 hours sat compared with 1633 hours sat during the same period last year.

APPENDIX 1

Table 1 - Crown Court cases received

	Total
Antrim	32
Belfast	121
Craigavon	34
Downpatrick	35
Dungannon	38
Londonderry	26
Newry	36
Total	322

Table 2 - Crown Court cases disposed

	Total
Antrim	46
Belfast	145
Craigavon	48
Downpatrick	47
Dungannon	30
Londonderry	42
Newry	39
Total	397

Table 3 - Crown Court defendants received

	Total
Antrim	37
Belfast	136
Craigavon	42
Downpatrick	41
Dungannon	45
Londonderry	34
Newry	40
Total	375

Table 4 - Crown Court defendants disposed

	Total
Antrim	58
Belfast	179
Craigavon	53
Downpatrick	64
Dungannon	42
Londonderry	47
Newry	52
Total	495

Table 5 - Waiting times in days

	Committal to hearing - days	Conviction to disposal - days	Total defendants disposed
Antrim	107	69	55
Belfast	98	67	171
Craigavon	79	56	51
Downpatrick	118	63	63
Dungannon	140	52	41
Londonderry	161	57	46
Newry	116	52	50
Total	111	62	477

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

Table 6 - Crown Court defendants disposed by judge type

	Judicial Level		Total
	County Court Judge	High Court Judge	
Antrim	58	0	58
Belfast	169	10	179
Craigavon	53	0	53
Downpatrick	61	3	64
Dungannon	41	1	42
Londonderry	47	0	47
Newry	52	0	52
Total	481	14	495

**Table 7 - Crown Court defendants disposed
by charge type**

All Offences Against the Person	52
All Sexual Offences	47
All Burglary Offences	12
All Robbery Offences	2
All Theft Offences	16
All Fraud and Forgery Offences	43
All Criminal Damage Offences	2
All Offences Against the State	9
All Other Offences	18
All Drug Offences	52
All Motoring Offences	24
All Non-Police Offences	0
Combination of charges	218
Total	495

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	19	34	5	0	58
Belfast	69	93	17	0	179
Craigavon	26	22	5	0	53
Downpatrick	17	43	4	0	64
Dungannon	11	23	8	0	42
Londonderry	19	18	10	0	47
Newry	11	30	11	0	52
Total	172	263	60	0	495

Table 9 - Crown Court sitting times

		Number of sittings	Total time
	Antrim	77	143:58
	Ballymena	2	0:35
	Belfast	237	575:30
	Craigavon	56	124:54
	Downpatrick	70	144:59
	Dungannon	86	248:40
	Lisburn	2	1:05
	Londonderry	69	185:18
	Newry	47	106:09
	Omagh	16	43:49
	Royal Courts of Justice	14	36:25
Total		676	1611:22

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

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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