

**Under embargo: 19 January 2021 00.01**

**Chief Inspectors: ‘Crown Court delays pose greatest risk to criminal justice’**

All four of Her Majesty’s Justice Chief Inspectors have united to express “grave concerns” about the potential long-term impact of Covid-19-related court backlogs on the criminal justice system across England and Wales.

In a joint report, the Chief Inspectors spell out how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the work of the police, prosecutors, prisons, probation and youth offending teams.

They point to difficulties and lengthy waits at all stages of the criminal justice process that “benefit no one and risk damage to many”.

The Chief Inspectors highlighted some positive initiatives during the Covid-19 pandemic, including the acceleration of digital working, and praised the commitment of staff.

However, other areas were of more concern, including the lack of education provision in custody and in the community for young people and the highly restrictive regimes for a majority of prisoners which have continued for many months without respite, impacting negatively on their physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing and also more generally on prospects for effective rehabilitation.

They conclude the greatest risk to criminal justice comes from the “unprecedented and very serious” backlogs in courts.

The number of ongoing cases in Crown Courts was 44 per cent higher in December 2020 compared to February of the same year. Latest figures show more than 53,000 cases are waiting to come before Crown Courts. Some of these cases have been scheduled for 2022. Despite additional funding, the continuing impact of Covid-19 could cause further delays.

Speaking on behalf of all four inspectorates, Chief Inspector of Probation Justin Russell said: “Crown Courts deal with the most serious cases, so this backlog concerns us all. The Covid-19 pandemic has meant severe delays and numerous cancellations throughout 2020, and this has had a negative impact on everyone involved.

“Delays mean victims must wait longer for cases to be heard; some will withdraw support for prosecutions because they have lost faith in the process. Witnesses will find it difficult to recall events that took place many months ago, and prosecutors waste significant periods of time preparing for cases that do not go ahead.

“Those accused of crimes face delays in their opportunities to defend themselves and seek acquittal. Defendants are kept on remand for longer periods, and prisoners continue to experience a highly restrictive prison regime or experience delays in accessing rehabilitation programmes and support through probation services.

“Court backlogs have a ripple effect across all criminal justice agencies and must be dealt with to ensure fair justice for victims and perpetrators of crime. This is a whole-system problem that requires a whole-system solution.”

The four Chief Inspectors – Justin Russell (Probation), Sir Thomas Winsor (Constabulary), Charlie Taylor (Prisons) and Kevin McGinty (Crown Prosecution Service) – have either published or are due to publishseparate reports into how each respective service coped with the pandemic.

Today’s publication brings together those findings and identifies cross-cutting themes.

The Chief Inspectors recognised the initial response to the pandemic was “swift and pragmatic”, and paid tribute to staff across all services for their commitment.

The four Chief Inspectors are calling for criminal justice agencies to work closely together to respond to the pandemic, and for the Government to provide national direction as well as the funding, time and access to expertise to help recovery.

They will give evidence to the House of Commons’ Justice Committee in a joint session on 19 January.

**Notes to editors**

1. ‘Impact of the pandemic on the Criminal Justice System. A joint view of the Criminal Justice Chief Inspectors on the Criminal Justice System’s response to Covid-19’ will be published on 19 January 2021 00.01 on the [Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates website](https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/cjji/).
2. The four criminal justice inspectorates are: HM Inspectorate of Probation; HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services; HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate; HM Inspectorate of Prisons.
3. In paragraph seven, we say that more than 53,000 cases are waiting to be heard in Crown Courts. Source: [HM Courts and Tribunal Service](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/hmcts-weekly-management-information-during-coronavirus-march-to-november-2020), published 14 December 2020.
4. All four Chief Inspectors will give evidence on 19 January 2021. Find out more on the [House of Commons Justice Committee’s website](https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/102/justice-committee/news/).
5. Chief Inspector of Probation Justin Russell is the nominated spokesperson for this report and is available for media interviews. For media enquiries, please contact Catherine Chan on 07889 405930 or [media@hmiprobation.gov.uk](mailto:media@hmiprobation.gov.uk).