

Justice Committee Warns of Failing County Courts and Calls for Urgent Overhaul

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The House of Commons Justice Committee has delivered a damning assessment of the county court system in England and Wales, warning that it is failing to deliver justice to the public and requires an urgent overhaul. Years of underinvestment, rising caseloads, and administrative breakdowns have left the system “dysfunctional”, according to the cross-party group of Members of Parliament.

In a detailed report published this week, the Justice Committee found that many individuals and businesses are unable to secure timely access to civil justice due to long delays, outdated technology, and a lack of trained court staff. The committee concluded that justice is being “routinely denied” to ordinary people, particularly in cases involving housing, debt, and family disputes.

Sir Bob Neill, Chair of the Justice Committee and Conservative Member of Parliament, said: “Justice delayed is justice denied. Our inquiry has revealed a system buckling under pressure, where vital cases are falling through the cracks. This cannot be allowed to continue.” He called on the Ministry of Justice to prioritise a comprehensive review of county courts, backed by a clear plan for investment and reform.

The report cites evidence that the average waiting time for small claims is now around 50.6 weeks, and 79.3 weeks for multi/fast-track cases. Meanwhile, court buildings are in poor condition, and digital infrastructure is unreliable. Some courts lack permanent judges, leading to cases being shuttled between locations to accommodate staff shortages and judicial capacity gaps. The result is a system that deters claimants and increases the emotional and financial burden on all parties involved.

While the problems span several years, critics argue that the current government’s attention to civil justice reform has been insufficient, with the committee now urging stronger focus on this area. Critics have pointed out that Labour’s focus on criminal justice reform has come at the expense of the civil court system, where many vulnerable individuals seek legal recourse.

The committee has recommended an urgent audit of court capacity, increased staffing, and the introduction of a dedicated court reform programme. It also called for greater data transparency and stronger oversight from the Ministry of Justice.

The decline of the county courts is more than just an administrative failure; it is a failure of government to protect citizens' access to fair and timely justice. Without swift intervention, trust in the civil justice system risks further erosion, with long-term consequences for legal accountability and the public's faith in the courts.