

## Justice for dirty money: Seizing the opportunities to tackle corruption, economic crime and SLAPPs

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, has key opportunities to tackle corruption and dirty money by:

- **Strengthening the Hillsborough Law** to ensure robust accountability and effective enforcement against abuses of public office and corruption;
- **Introducing ticketed judges to beat the backlog of economic crime cases** and take forward Lord Leveson's proposals for removing jury trial for complex and lengthy economic crime cases; and
- **Protecting London's reputation as a global legal centre by eliminating "SLAPPs"** and promoting accountability for high ethical standards in the legal profession.

### 1. Strengthen accountability for abuse of public office and corruption

The problem:

- The UK's [archaic Misconduct in Public Office](#) (MIPO) offence has serious deficiencies when it comes to tackling misconduct by public officials.<sup>1</sup>
- Our [research](#) showed that 92% of identifiable convictions since 2014 were against junior and mid-level police and prison staff, and only 2% against holders of executive positions or senior political public offices.<sup>2</sup>
- The majority of these MIPO cases target inappropriate sexual relationships, while there were only seven convictions - less than 4% - involving serious financial misconduct.
- MIPO prosecutions have [declined](#) by 35% over the last decade, while public scandals in both central and local government have badly damaged trust in politics.<sup>3</sup>

The opportunity:

- The newly introduced [Public Office \(Accountability\) Bill](#) contains a very welcome rewrite of the UK's outdated misconduct in public office laws and introduces a new requirement on public authorities to have a code of conduct for ethical behaviour.<sup>4</sup>
- But it is essential that these long-overdue reforms [effectively close the gaps](#) that could leave abuses of public office and corruption unsanctioned.<sup>5</sup>
- The Bill should also ensure that elected officials whether at a local, devolved or national level should be subject to the same minimum standards in their codes of ethics.

<sup>1</sup> Spotlight on Corruption, 15 May 2025, "[RIP MIPO: introducing a new corruption in public office offence](#)"

<sup>2</sup> Spotlight on Corruption, 26 February 2025, "[Misconduct in public office: the record so far](#)"

<sup>3</sup> Spotlight on Corruption, [Anti-Corruption Enforcement Tracker](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Public Office \(Accountability\) Bill](#)

<sup>5</sup> Spotlight on Corruption, 17 September 2025, "[Will politicians finally face real risk of prosecution? Spotlight welcomes new clauses to tackle corruption in Duty of Candour Bill](#)"

## Recommendations:

- Ensure the Bill applies to private contractors for central government departments, not just local government and the police and fire services;
- Introduce 'consent and connivance' provisions to capture situations where senior public officials may have turned a blind eye to abuse of office;
- Insert a clause to capture those who might encourage, directly or indirectly, a public office holder to engage in abuse of their office – so that private actors are also covered;
- Ensure elected officials are included in the definition of 'public authority' under the requirement in the Bill to have a Code of Ethics, including mayors, local councillors and ministers;
- Work with HM Treasury and the Home Office to secure long-term funding for the [new Domestic Corruption Unit](#) to effectively enforce this Bill and set up a proper reporting line so that the public and whistleblowers know where to disclose seriously improper acts.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Beat the backlog in economic crime cases with specialist courts and ticketed judges

### The problem:

- Crown Court [backlogs](#) are now rapidly closing in on 80,000 cases.<sup>7</sup> Almost a quarter (23%) of all trials are adjourned, and only 45% go ahead on time. London caseloads are growing the fastest - open cases are up 25% over the last year.
- As the Leveson Review [found](#), the crisis in our criminal justice system is not just a legacy of chronic under-funding.<sup>8</sup> Many problems arise from the growing complexity of criminal law, with the result that jury trials today take twice as long as they did in 2000.
- The length and complexity of economic crime trials, combined with the fact that suspects are almost always bailed, means these cases are at the [back of the courtroom queue](#).<sup>9</sup> It now regularly takes two to three years for prosecutors to get a trial slot.
- The length of economic crime trials risks skewing the composition of the jury to a limited pool of people - Leveson [noted](#) that it is often the retired or unemployed who are able to commit to lengthy trials which may lead juries being made up of a demographic that is less likely to be able to follow complex evidence - such as financial transactions and corporate structures in the case of economic crime cases.<sup>10</sup>
- There are real questions as to whether white-collar criminals - such as CEOs, CFOs of multinational companies - really get a jury of their peers where this happens.

### The opportunity:

- The government has received bold and pragmatic proposals from the Leveson review [recommending](#) that juries be dispensed with in the most serious and complex fraud,

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<sup>6</sup> Spotlight on Corruption, 12 December 2024, "[No more turning a blind eye: Spotlight welcomes new Domestic Corruption Unit](#)"

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Justice, 25 September 2025, "[Criminal court statistics quarterly: April to June 2025](#)"

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Justice, 9 July 2025, "[Independent Review of the Criminal Courts: Part 1](#)", p.306-307

<sup>9</sup> Spotlight on Corruption, 19 December 2024, "[Back of the courtroom queue: How to tackle serious delays in economic crime cases in the courts of England and Wales](#)".

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Justice, 9 July 2025, "[Independent Review of the Criminal Courts: Part 1](#)", p.306-307

bribery and money laundering cases, proposing that these cases instead be tried by a judge sitting alone or with two lay assessors as an intermediate court.<sup>11</sup>

- Adopting these proposals - in our view the Fraud Panel model recommended by Lord Roskill and Lord Justice Auld is preferable to a judge alone model - would result in significant time and resource savings. It is also likely to lead to better and more consistent enforcement outcomes in economic crime cases.
- HMCTS has the opportunity to significantly enhance court capacity by establishing a flagship facility for hearing cases of high-level fraud, cyber and economic crime, following the City of London Corporation's [investment](#) of £596 million in Salisbury Square, a new development on Fleet Street that will provide 18 new courts.<sup>12</sup>
- However, for this facility to be used effectively, it will need to be accompanied by the creation of a specialist 'economic crime' ticket for judges. The Law Commission has already [recommended](#)<sup>13</sup> 'ticketed' confiscation judges to increase asset recovery. In our view this would be too narrow, and it would be more desirable to create a judicial specialism in economic crime which would also establish a clear career path into the judiciary for white collar crime specialists at the bar.
- The new court facility should also be equipped with the most up to date technology to both speed up process and allow for open justice, reducing costs and building public confidence.

Recommendations:

- Pilot judge-only or fraud panel hearings for serious and complex economic crime in the new courts in Salisbury Square;
- Create a ticket for judges who receive specific training on economic crime to hear the economic crime cases, as [recommended](#) by the Justice Committee;<sup>14</sup>
- Ensure the new economic crime courts have the most up to date technology which allow both speed of process and open justice.

### 3. Eliminate SLAPPs and legal sector enabling of corruption

The problem:

- Strategic Litigation against Public Participation ("SLAPPs") have been used to stifle scrutiny and silence public interest reporting, from [Russian warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin](#)<sup>15</sup> to the fraudsters behind the [\\$4 billion OneCoin crypto scam](#).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Justice, 9 July 2025, "[Independent Review of the Criminal Courts: Part 1](#)", p.28

<sup>12</sup> City of London Corporation, 22 April 2025, [Written evidence to the House of Lords Constitution Committee's inquiry into the rule of law](#)

<sup>13</sup> Law Commission, 8 November 2022, [Confiscation of the Proceeds of Crime After Conviction: final report](#), p 167

<sup>14</sup> Justice Committee report, 11 October 2022, [Fraud and the Justice System](#), para 100.

<sup>15</sup> OpenDemocracy, 23 January 2023, "[Revealed: UK government helped sanctioned Putin ally sue British journalist](#)"

<sup>16</sup> The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 23 September 2025, "['Send a clear message': Law firm's dirty tactics on behalf of \\$4bn crypto scam](#)"

- The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 introduced piecemeal anti-SLAPP legislation aimed to protect those exposing economic crime, but it is already clear this would be too limited in scope and ineffective in practice.
- Meanwhile the early efforts by the Solicitors Regulation Authority to tackle the lawyers who act as guns for hire in SLAPP cases have [exposed](#) the need for much greater accountability for this professional enabling of abusive litigation to conceal corruption.<sup>17</sup>

The opportunity:

- The Solicitors Regulation Authority is showing a welcome appetite to tackle SLAPPs but as the regulator has itself [pointed out](#), “the main way to address the problem of SLAPPs is through a robust legislative solution that gives the courts more powers”.<sup>18</sup>
- There is strong cross-party support for tackling SLAPPs, demonstrated by the [Private Members’ Bill](#) brought forward by Labour MP Wayne David, which gained the Conservative government’s support but ultimately fell due to limited legislative time before the 2024 election.<sup>19</sup> This was further underscored in the current Parliament during a [backbench debate](#) in which MPs from across six political parties raised the alarm about SLAPPs and called for action in November 2024.
- The Prime Minister has [expressed](#) welcome ambition to tackle SLAPPs and protect investigative journalism as the lifeblood of British democracy.<sup>20</sup>

Recommendations:

- Introduce a robust standalone Anti-SLAPP Law to establish universal protections against SLAPPs which:
  - allow courts to discard threats at an early stage using a clear objective test to identify a SLAPP;
  - cap costs to allow defendants to be able to defend themselves, while also punishing those seeking to silence public interest speech.
- Work with legal sector regulators, including the [Legal Services Board](#)<sup>21</sup> and the Solicitors Regulation Authority, to strengthen accountability for lawyers who engage in SLAPPs and other unethical behaviour that [enables](#) corruption, state capture and kleptocracy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Democracy for Sale, 28 January 2025, “[UK law firm that acted for Putin’s warlord Prigozhin 'broke no rules'](#)”

<sup>18</sup> SRA, 24 March 2025, “[Our approach to SLAPPs cases](#)”

<sup>19</sup> [Strategic Litigation against Public Participation Bill](#)

<sup>20</sup> Keir Starmer, The Guardian, 28 October 2024, “[Journalism is the lifeblood of British democracy. My government will protect it](#)”

<sup>21</sup> Legal Services Board, 6 March 2025, “[New regulatory proposals to strengthen lawyers’ ethical standards](#)”

<sup>22</sup> IBE Taskforce on Business Ethics and the Legal Profession, 2 April 2025, “[A review of client acceptance by solicitors in England & Wales in relation to kleptocracy, state capture and grand corruption](#)”; Spotlight on Corruption, 18 March 2025, “[Gatekeepers, enablers or technicians? The contested role of lawyers as facilitators of kleptocracy and grand corruption](#)”