

Briefing: Key opportunities to tackle corruption and dirty money through justice reforms



Background:

Some significant strides were taken by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) under the Starmer administration to tackle corruption and abuses of power. But further action is needed to stop powerful elites from abusing the law to silence critics, to accelerate justice for fraudsters and white-collar criminals, and to strengthen accountability for public officials who abuse their office.

This briefing identifies three opportunities for the government to ensure the justice system is equipped to tackle corruption and dirty money:

1. Eliminate SLAPPS and legal sector enabling of corruption
2. Tackle the backlog in economic crime cases
3. Close loopholes in the new Misconduct in Public Office (MIPO) offence

1. Eliminate SLAPPS and legal sector enabling of corruption

The problem:

- Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (“SLAPPS”) have been used to stifle scrutiny and silence public interest reporting, from Russian warlord Yevgeny Prigozhin¹ to the fraudsters behind the \$4 billion OneCoin crypto scam.²
- Piecemeal anti-SLAPP measures in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 are too limited in scope and ineffective in practice.
- Meanwhile, a string of unsuccessful attempts by the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA)³ to take on the lawyers who act as guns for hire in SLAPP cases has left the regulator on the backfoot and exposed the need for more robust accountability for professional enabling of abusive litigation.⁴
- On the international stage, the UK is falling behind, with 22 other European countries having now taken initial or definitive action to introduce anti-SLAPP legislation at a national level.⁵

The opportunity:

- The SRA has underlined that, *“the main way to address the problem of SLAPPS is through a robust legislative solution that gives the courts more powers”*.⁶
- There is strong cross-party support for tackling SLAPPS, demonstrated by Private Members’ Bills brought forward in both Houses by Baroness Stowell and Sir John Whittingdale MP respectively.⁷ With the MoJ’s backing, these could be developed into landmark comprehensive legislation.

¹ OpenDemocracy, [Revealed: UK government helped sanctioned Putin ally sue British journalist](#), January 2023

² The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, [Send a clear message: Law firm’s dirty tactics on behalf of \\$4bn crypto scam](#), September 2025

³ The Law Society Gazette, [In depth: SRA on the ropes over alleged SLAPPS after third defeat](#), January 2026

⁴ Democracy for Sale, [UK law firm that acted for Putin’s warlord Prigozhin ‘broke no rules’](#), January 2025

⁵ European Association of Private International Law, [Status of the Anti-SLAPP Directive Transpositions at the 7 May 2026 Deadline](#), May 2026

⁶ Solicitors Regulation Authority, [Our approach to SLAPPS cases](#), March 2025

⁷ Anti-SLAPP Coalition, [Two Private Members’ Bills in both houses place Anti-SLAPP reform firmly on the parliamentary agenda](#), June 2026

Recommendations:

- 1) Introduce a standalone Anti-SLAPP Law to establish universal protections against SLAPPs and:
 - 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;
 - put the SRA's powers to compel disclosure of legally privileged material on a statutory footing.⁸
- 2) Work with legal sector regulators, including the Legal Services Board⁹ and the SRA, to strengthen accountability for lawyers who engage in SLAPPs and other unethical behaviour that enables corruption, state capture and kleptocracy.¹⁰

2. Tackle the backlog in economic crime cases

The problem:

- 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](#). It now regularly takes two to three years for prosecutors to get a trial slot.¹¹
- Economic crime cases contribute disproportionately to the 80,000-case backlog in the Crown Courts: while they make up just 1.8% of cases, they [account](#) for 9% of the backlog; and the average serious fraud case takes twice as long as an ordinary case to progress through the system.¹²

The opportunity:

- Targeted interventions to speed up economic crime cases could have an outsized impact and ease pressure on the wider criminal justice system.
- The City of London's £600 million [investment](#) in 18 new courts at Salisbury Square is a golden opportunity to pilot an economic crime court centre with specialist judges.¹³

Recommendations:

- 1) The government should shift the dial on delays to economic crime cases by:
 - increasing the leniency for early guilty pleas to a 50% reduction in sentence;
 - using plea agreements more proactively;
 - incentivising whistleblowers to come forward with 'smoking gun' evidence.
- 2) The Salisbury Square development should be used to pilot an economic crime court centre that:
 - co-locates criminal and civil cases relating to the most complex economic crimes;
 - creates a 'ticket' for specialist judges who receive economic crime training;
 - trials the Intensive Disclosure Regime recommended by Jonathan Fisher KC.¹⁴

⁸ Law Gazette, [High Court to test SRA privilege rights](#), June 2026

⁹ Legal Services Board, [New regulatory proposals to strengthen lawyers' ethical standards](#), March 2025

¹⁰ IBE Taskforce on Business Ethics and the Legal Profession, [A review of client acceptance by solicitors in England & Wales in relation to kleptocracy, state capture and grand corruption](#); Spotlight on Corruption, March 2025, [Gatekeepers, enablers or technicians? The contested role of lawyers as facilitators of kleptocracy and grand corruption](#), April 2025

¹¹ Spotlight on Corruption, [Back of the courtroom queue: How to tackle serious delays in economic crime cases in the courts of England and Wales](#), December 2024

¹² Jonathan Fisher KC, [Fraud in the Digital Age: Independent Review of Disclosure and Fraud Offences](#), July 2026

¹³ House of Lords Constitution Committee, [City of London Corporation – Written Evidence \(ROL0090\)](#), April 2025

¹⁴ Jonathan Fisher KC, [Disclosure in the Digital Age: Independent Review of Disclosure and Fraud Offences](#), July 2026

- 3) The benefits of economic crime specialism should also be felt across the country by:
- rolling out the protocol for complex cases pioneered at Southwark Crown Court to other cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds;¹⁵
 - adopting more flexible and creative court processes to optimise efficiency including:
 - continuing nightingale courts and using other non-conventional hearing venues;
 - expanded use of remote hearings and flexible operating hours (enabling working professionals to sit as lay magistrates after-hours);
 - allowing CPS prosecutors to sit as magistrates and deputy recorders.

3. Close loopholes in the new Misconduct in Public Office (MIPO) offence

The problem:

- Our review of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill with legal experts and a comparison with the Law Commission's recommendations reveals shortcomings in the new proposed MIPO offence.
- These flaws risk undermining the purpose of the new provisions:
 - there is a lack of clear coverage of private contractors
 - the definition of a 'public official' in the Bill is too narrow
 - the use of "to obtain" in s12(1)(a) may limit prosecutions to where a benefit or detriment has actually occurred
 - the "reasonable excuse" defence is too broad
 - private actors who encourage a public official to commit an offence are not clearly covered.

The opportunity:

- The government has an opportunity to introduce targeted amendments in the Lords to close these loopholes in the Bill. These uncontroversial fixes would be unlikely to delay the passage of the Bill.
- With the government's bold devolution agenda, the Bill could also be used to ensure all elected officials – whether at a local, devolved or national level – are subject to the same minimum standards in their codes of ethics.

Recommendations:

- 1) The government should close off remaining loopholes in the new MIPO offence through amendments in the Public Office (Accountability) Bill that:
- Ensure the offence applies to private contractors for central government departments;
 - Introduce 'consent and connivance' provisions to capture situations where senior public officials may have turned a blind eye to abuse of office;
 - 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.
- 2) The MoJ should work with HM Treasury and the Home Office to secure long-term funding for the new [Domestic Corruption Unit](#) to effectively enforce this new MIPO offence and set up a proper reporting line so that the public and whistleblowers know where to disclose seriously improper acts.

¹⁵ [Southwark Practice Note: Judicial Control and Management of Heavy Fraud and other complex criminal cases](#), July 2024