

This country is in a transition process to withdraw from the EU.

National ordinary courts

This page gives you an overview of the different types of courts in Northern Ireland.

Ordinary courts – introduction

The various courts in Northern Ireland are organised as follows:

The Supreme Court

In 2009, the new **Supreme Court of the United Kingdom** took over the jurisdiction of the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords. It also took over the devolved functions of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (the highest court of appeal in several independent Commonwealth countries, UK overseas territories and British Crown dependencies).

The Supreme Court is the **final court of appeal** in the United Kingdom for both criminal and civil cases, although Scottish criminal cases do not have the right of appeal to the Supreme Court. Permission to refer a case for appeal to the Supreme Court will usually be granted only if it involves points of law of public importance.

The Court of Appeal

The Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland is based in the Royal Courts of Justice in Belfast. It hears criminal appeals from the Crown Court and civil appeals from the High Court.

The High Court

The High Court in Belfast deals with civil cases, hears appeals in criminal cases, and also has the power to review the actions of individuals or organisations to make sure they have acted legally and justly. The High Court usually deals with cases if the value of the claim is over £30,000. In some circumstances, a case with a value over £30,000 can be sent from the High Court to the county court; similarly a case under the value of £30,000 may be transferred from the county court to the High Court.

The High Court has three divisions, as follows:

The Family Division: The Family Division deals with complex defended divorce cases, wardship, adoption, domestic violence and so on. It also deals with appeals from magistrates' and county courts in matrimonial cases, deals with the affairs of people who are mentally ill and with simple probate matters.

The Queens Bench Division: The Queens Bench Division deals with large and/or complex claims for compensation. It also deals with a limited number of appeals from magistrates' or Crown Courts. It also reviews the actions of organisations to see whether they have acted legally, and deals with libel and slander actions.

The Chancery Division: The Chancery Division deals with trusts, contested wills, winding up companies, bankruptcy, mortgages, charities, contested revenue (usually income tax) cases, etc.

The Crown Court

The Crown Courts deal with the following types of cases:

More serious criminal offences which are tried by judge and in most cases a jury

Convictions in the magistrates' courts that are referred to the Crown Court for sentencing.

Imprisonment and fines in the Crown Courts are more severe than in the magistrates' courts.

The County Court

County Courts deal with civil cases, which are heard by a judge or district judge. The County Court usually deals with cases that are under £30,000 in value (or £45,000 in equity matters). Cases with a higher value are heard in the High Court – see above. All claims arising from regulated credit agreements must be started in the County Court, whatever their value.

Examples of cases dealt with by the County Court:

County Courts can deal with a wide range of cases, but the most common ones are:

Landlord and tenant disputes: for example, possession (eviction), rent arrears, repairs

Consumer disputes: for example, faulty goods or services

Personal injury claims (injuries caused by negligence): for example, traffic accidents, falling into holes in the pavement, accidents at work

Undefended divorce cases, but only in some County Courts.

Race and sex discrimination cases

Debt problems: for example, a creditor seeking payment

Employment problems: for example, wages or salary owing or pay in lieu of notice.

Appeals from the magistrates' court which are dealt with by a judge (and at least two lay magistrates if the defendant is a young person)

Small claims cases

Small claims cases are also heard in the County Court. In general, a small claim is one where the value of the claim is not more than £3000.

The Magistrates' Courts

Magistrates' courts deal with criminal and some civil cases. Cases are heard by a district judge (magistrate's court).

Criminal cases in the Magistrates' Courts

Magistrates' courts deal with criminal offences where the defendant is not entitled to trial by jury. These are known as summary offences. Summary offences involve a maximum penalty of six months imprisonment and/or a fine of up to £5,000.

Magistrates' courts also deal with offences where the defendant can choose trial by jury but decides to have his or her case heard in the magistrates' courts.

If the defendant chooses trial by jury, the case will be passed on to the Crown Court.

The Youth Court

The youth court deals with young people who have committed criminal offences, and who are aged between 10 and 17. The youth court is part of the magistrates' court and cases are heard before a district judge (magistrate's court) and two other specially trained lay magistrates. If a young person is charged with a very serious offence – which in the case of an adult is punishable by 14 years imprisonment or more, the youth court can commit him or her for trial at the Crown Court.

Civil Cases in the Magistrates' Courts

Magistrates' courts deal with a limited number of civil cases as follows:

Some civil debts: for example, arrears of income tax, national insurance contributions, VAT arrears, rates

Licenses: for example, granting, renewing or taking away licenses for pubs and clubs

Some matrimonial problems: for example, maintenance and removing a spouse from the matrimonial home

Welfare of children, for example, local authority care or supervision orders, adoption proceedings and residence orders.

Coroners Courts

Investigate the circumstances of sudden, violent or unnatural deaths.

Related Links

[Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service](#)

Last update: 16/01/2019

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